

THE SUBTLE MINOTAUR

OUT of the past, terror returns to the life of Nigel Toler; terror for which there can be only two possible explanations: a haunting menace to civilization, or Toler's own insanity.

Only the cold hands of death succeed in moulding the myth into the awful substance of reality as the story thrusts on, with ever-increasing momentum, from the first stab of drama in the opening pages to the final bizarre and terrible climax.

Alexander Alderson is well known as a writer of short stories. This is his first full-length novel, and a most promising one.

THE SUBTLE MINOTAUR

BY
ALEXANDER ALDERSON

JOHN GIFFORD LTD
125 CHARING CROSS ROAD, W.C.2

First published 1914

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
NORTHUMBERLAND PRESS LIMITED GATESHEAD ON TYNE
AND BOUND BY JAMES BURN

**FOR
D. P.
WHO LIKES A SPOT
OF
BLOOD AND THUNDER**

This is a work of fiction. All characters and incidents are imaginary, and any similarity between the characters of this book and actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental

1

HER name was Angela. She was a long-legged, pale-skinned creature, with shining chestnut hair. She was lithe and soft, and she moved with a statuesque grace which drew men to her side, and women to their mirrors. Physically her name was apt, but in the green depths of her eyes there was a hint of something more; a seething, frustrated turmoil that could be mistaken for wickedness.

As she stood there alone in the darkness on the tow path at Laleham, looking out over the cold black waters of the Thames, her anger began to ebb away. The warmth of the whisky she had drunk in the 'King's Head' at Shepperton spread voluptuously through her body. She smiled. A feeling of great calm crept over her as the fitful breeze sprang up again to ruffle the fur of her coat. She raised her eyes to the moon floating pacifically through the wispy clouds. In the soft cold light the nakedness of the tall swaying trees on the opposite bank of the river was gallantly shrouded in thin fronds of mist. Only the lapping of the waters a few inches beneath the tips of her slippers broke the silence.

She was glad that she had bought herself that third glass of whisky. Under its influence her mind drifted into a warm indefinite niche, in no way connected with reality. A murmur of satisfaction drifted lazily from her throat. Everything which concerned her at that moment was beautiful. The moon was beautiful; the trees were beautiful; the river was beautiful.

Drawing the cold air of the night deep into her lungs, she started softly to murmur the opening stanza of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan".

She closed her eyes and she was floating high above the fabulous pleasure dome of Xanadu; the sacred river flowed by beneath her. . . .

So engrossed was she in the sublime sensuality of the

moment that music seemed to float out to her across the water to swirl about her slender body in foaming erotic cadenzas. She smiled and hugged herself. Then of a sudden her mind cleared; she opened her eyes and stood motionless.

Music there was. Music proud and fragile, that weaved lace of the moon wrack and sent thrills to her heart.

Slowly she turned round and faced towards a neat white bungalow, set some way back from the path behind a low hedge of golden privet. No light showed, but someone there was playing the piano. The strange elusiveness of the soft, insistent melody seemed to draw her forward. She walked across the tow path to the neat green wicket gate and stepped through into the tiny garden. It was then that she realized that the french windows at the front of the bungalow stood wide open despite the coldness of the night. Dimly, in the moonlit room beyond, she could see the back of a man, seated at a baby grand piano, playing softly to himself. She picked up the long narrow skirts of her dinner dress and tiptoed up the short strip of macadam, which ran diagonally across the lawn, and stood beside the open window. She made no sound, she was sure of that, yet suddenly the man stopped playing and spun round to face her. The moonlight glinted on the dull sheen of a revolver barrel.

"Don't move!" he snapped, "or I shoot!"

She did not move. Rigid with shock, she gazed, dry mouthed, at the gun muzzle. His voice broke the spell.

"Come here."

Her eyes flickered upwards, but his face was lost in the shadows. She filled her lungs, opened wide her mouth, dragged down the corners of her lips.

"You'll only scream once. . . . Come here."

Her lips sagged together. Wide eyed she stepped forward. As she entered the shadows his hand caught her by the shoulder, dragged her into the room and flung her down upon a divan set against one wall of the room, smashing the breath from her body, choking off her involuntary scream before it reached her lips. Before she could regain her breath he had drawn the curtains and switched on the lamp which stood on the corner of the piano.

He looked steadily down at her over the barrel of a heavy service revolver.

He was short and broad. The hand which held the revolver was large and blunt with short silvery hairs between the joints of the fingers. He waited until she had pushed herself up into a sitting position before he spoke.

"Pull your skirts down, Mata Hari," he jibed, "you're a big girl now."

She looked up at him in unblinking fascination and slowly restored the hem of her dress to its rightful position around her ankles. Then her frightened, befuddled mind noticed something, grasped it in hope, and her fear grew less. The grey eyes looking down at her were cold and steady, but his lips were trembling nervously, and his teeth were tightly clenched.

She struggled to pull herself together, moistened her lips and straightened her back. She looked him squarely in the face.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" She had intended her voice to be clipped and firm, but to her it sounded weak and unsteady. "Put that gun away and let me out of here."

"Don't move! Don't tempt me to shoot you out of hand. That wouldn't do at all."

He moved the revolver closer to her face. She drew back against the wall and gazed, wide eyed, up at him. Her lips quivered with rage.

"Tell me," he went on, "if you can do so without being rude, were you sent here to kill me—or merely to seduce me?"

A short, dry, half-hysterical laugh escaped her. Seduce? Rape had been closer to her mind. Realization struck her and with it came the chill of a deeper fear. She had been right when she had thought him afraid, but she had misjudged the cause of his fear. Her scalp prickled as she realized that he would kill her without hesitation if he felt there was reason enough.

Stark terror was rising up in her, but she had no intention of showing it. Nevertheless she could not hide the brittleness in her voice.

"Put that gun down," she cried, "and don't be a damned

fool. I'm not afraid of you so you might as well drop the melodrama and apologize."

He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth; she was wasting her breath, and she knew it.

"How is the dear Doctor?" he asked. "He must be getting old to employ anyone quite so clumsy as you. I really don't know whether to kill you myself or to send you back to the dear Doctor. I don't think he will forgive your failure, and I'm sure he would remove you so much more artistically. . . . Or perhaps you know?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

"You said that before, and I don't believe it. I'm waiting."

"For what?"

"For the explanation of this visit."

"Get out of my way!" Angela sprang to her feet and faced him. It was her last bluff. She could feel her self-control beginning to crumble.

"Sit down," he ordered.

"No!"

"Sit down!" There was a note of authority in his voice this time. His lips were steady now and his face had relaxed. He knew now that he was master of the situation; he did not intend to be disobeyed.

"Get out of my way . . ."

She did not finish her command. She found herself lying flat on her back on the divan with the breath knocked out of her body. Gasping painfully she sat up and looked at him. She was quivering with terror; she could not hide it any longer.

"Please let me go," she whimpered. "I don't know who you are or what you want. Please let me go."

"This is all very touching," he said. "Would you like to sob on my shoulder, or would you prefer it if I were to let you ring up Reismann to ask him to come and take you home?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she sobbed, burying her head in her hands.

He smiled wryly and pulled back the hammer of the pistol with his thumb. Angela looked up quickly as she heard the click of the mechanism.

"No!" she gasped. "No! You can't!" Her voice quivered to a shriek. "For God's sake don't shoot me!"

"Where's Reismann?" He spoke through his tightly clenched teeth. His lips were trembling again but his eyes were as cold and steady as ever. "I'm waiting. . . ."

Angela crouched back against the wall, mouthing incoherently. Her tongue seemed to stick to her teeth. She wanted to plead with him. Beg him to spare her. Bribe him. Buy her life back from him. Pay him with money; all the money she had. Or with her body. Anything, just to let her live. But her tongue was stiff and dry. Her throat was choked with sand. She tried to scream, but achieved nothing but an arid, rasping gasp.

And he just went on staring down at her; lips shivering in front of big, clenched, white teeth; eyes cold and steady, watching her terror without a glimmer of mercy.

"I'll give you just five seconds to start talking. Where is Reismann?"

Her ears began to roar. Her throat, dry and rasping, seemed to wither away. She tried to scream. Desperately she tried to swallow that she might try again to scream. She prayed in her terror for the supreme luxury of one scream for salvation, one cry for help. But her throat was dead and dry; her tongue was useless. The revolver moved closer and closer. The room expanded, quivered, and crowded in upon her. She crashed into infinity. There was only darkness.

* * * *

But at length there was a light in that darkness. At first it was small and a great distance away. But it was light. Her tongue moved and tasted the rank staleness of terror still lingering in her mouth. She opened her eyes and the light took form on the corner of the piano. She was still alive, but for a while she no longer cared.

Slowly she pulled herself up with her back against the wall. The revolver no longer threatened her. The man was sitting on the piano stool with his head cupped in his hands. He had about him an air of complete exhaustion. He did not raise his head or move in any way when at last he spoke.

"My name is Nigel Toler. I think I owe you an apology."

In his hand was a piece of paper, a newspaper cutting. At his feet lay her handbag with its contents strewn about on the floor. She felt too cold and weak to move or to say anything. It did not occur to her to wonder at the fact that she was still alive; she just accepted it numbly.

She recognized the newspaper cutting. It was already yellowing with age. It was eight years old. Almost exactly eight years old. It was a photograph cut from the *Daily Mail*. She knew the caption by heart. It read:

Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Sansom, seen above with his sixteen-year-old daughter Angela, yesterday received a bar to his D.S.O. from His Majesty the King at a Buckingham Palace investiture.

North Africa was news in those days. It all seemed so unimportant, and so long ago. . . .

Nigel Toler wearily raised his head and held out the cutting for her to take.

"It's a good thing you had this with you," he said. Then as an afterthought: "And it's a good thing you didn't change much as you grew up."

When she did not answer he rose to his feet and went on: "I think you need a drink. Only rum I'm afraid, and not very good rum at that."

When he returned from the side table with the tumbler she was still sitting, pale and motionless, gazing blankly in front of her.

"Here, drink this," he said softly, holding the glass to her lips.

Instinctively she sipped and as the neat spirit caught the back of her throat she fell into a paroxysm of coughing. When she recovered she felt better; her head had cleared; she could feel the blood flowing back to her cheeks.

He took a cigarette from a small ebony box on the piano and put it between her lips. As he lit it for her she noticed that on the side of the small gold lighter were engraved the wings of the R.A.F. and the initials N. T.

Covering his eyes with his left hand he gripped the bridge of his nose and shook his head as if trying to revive himself.

Then he sat down again on the piano stool and started to pack her belongings back into her handbag.

"Miss Sansom," he said, "my story is rather long and involved and, quite frankly, I don't feel inclined to go into details now. However I will tell you this. I have good reason to believe that someone will try to kill me before very long and I'm not having a very pleasant time of it. I've been damned rough with you to-night, I know; but I think that if you will give me a chance to explain you will at least understand, even if you can't forgive me."

Angela lifted her glass shakily to her lips and took another sip. She did not cough this time but shuddered violently. She didn't give a damn whether he explained or not, and she didn't want to understand.

"Why don't you go to the police?" she asked. Her voice was flat and spiritless.

Toler got to his feet and gave a wry little smile. Then turning his back on her he gazed down into the hissing gas fire in the corner of the room. It was some moments before he answered; when he did so his voice was little more than a whisper.

"The police think I'm mad. . . . Cracked as a coot. . . . Suffering from hallucinations or something such."

He turned to face her and seemed about to speak again. Then he lifted his head as if listening for something. For a second she could catch no sound; and it was gone almost as soon as it reached her ears. For a brief space the high-pitched roaring whistle of a jet plane searing its way through the night filled the room. Then it was gone. Toler raised his eyes and looked wistfully beyond his four confining walls. He sighed and then looked wearily down at her.

"Miss Sansom, will you go now please? If you want to hear any more I shall be at the 'Anchor' in Shepperton for dinner to-morrow evening at seven. If you're interested, perhaps you'd like to join me. Then I might be able to make amends for what has just happened. You know the 'Anchor'?"

She nodded her head blankly.

"Will you come?" he asked.

When she made no reply he helped her gently to her feet and draped her wrap about her shoulders. Momentarily

he gripped her arms in his broad square hands. It was strange after all that had just happened; while his grip was upon her it seemed to warm her and give her strength. She turned her head. He looked expressionlessly into her face for several seconds and then gave a little smile. He was calm now but his eyes were questioning.

"I suppose you have a car somewhere outside?" he asked.

"Yes."

The smile fluttered round his lips again.

"Maybe," he said, "you have a little explaining to do too."

She shot him a quick, insolent glance. Her senses were warming up again; she was coming back to life.

But before any words could reach her lips, he had taken her once more by the arm. Gently, but firmly, he ushered her across to the curtains which fluttered gently before the window which still stood wide open.

"Good night," he said, giving her her handbag, and lightly squeezed her arm.

The next moment she found herself once more alone in the moonlight. She no longer noticed the beauty of the poplars and the river. The air had grown still colder and lost its sweetness.

As she reached her car and opened the door that same haunting melody came drifting through the stillness to lay an icy hand upon her. The romance had gone; only the melancholy remained.

2

ANGELA did not sleep well that night. She lay in her bed twisting and turning as the shaft of moonlight traced its path around the walls of her room. The night was cold but her thin pyjamas clung to her body as the sweat oozed from her pores. Only now and then did she fall into a fitful sleep, peopled with soft, monotonous voices. All night long the square, weary face of Nigel Toler hung before her in the gloom. The deep shadows seemed to reach out menacingly towards her; she turned to the moonlight to seek refuge in its brilliance; but she turned her head quickly away again as if fearing some horror lurking in the shadows.

Somewhere a clock struck two. God! but it was only six hours since she had left Peter Vesey standing there crimson with embarrassment in the lounge of the Savoy. Six hours away from the pointless monotony of her life. She couldn't remember the cause of their argument, but she remembered slapping his face. She slapped his face in the lounge of the Savoy, and then dashed out in the darkness. She remembered her reckless drive out of London. She had nearly crashed with a bus in Kingston, and again as she took the corner at Hampton Court too fast. Then the dash through Hampton Village and through Sunbury on the crown of the narrow road with her hand pressed hard on the horn. And the sickening skid on Halliford bend that had nearly stopped her once and for all. The slow nerve-shattered crawl to Shepperton for three large whiskies, one after the other, in the bar at the 'King's Head'. Nice girls, really nice girls, didn't drink in bars; and only bad girls drank alone. Why did her mother have to be so damned mid-Victorian? Then the trembling drive to Laleham Lock to forget her anger and collect her nerves and pull herself together. And the moonlight and the music. . . .

Don't move or I shoot. . . .

She'd been too young during the war to have fun. Her

mother had kept a close rein upon her as long as the black-out lasted. Peace was too damned peaceful. Life needed danger to give it spice. She wanted adventure. She wanted danger. But it was one thing to lean on a bar with her own smart friends and talk of danger, the spice of life, through a haze of gin and bitters; another quite different thing to stand shivering in the moonlight looking down the wrong end of a gun.

Don't move or I shoot. . . .

When at last the late winter sun rose above the elms outside her bedroom window her heart greeted it as a friend given up for lost. She felt safe again. Turning on her pillows she closed her eyes and slept quietly for a while.

Without knocking, the housemaid came into the room, bearing with her a cup of tea on a silver salver. She was a woman in her middle fifties, short, lean, and prematurely aged. In her earlier life she had been employed as Angela's nursemaid.

"Come along, Miss Angela," she said, "it's past nine o'clock."

"Oh, go away and leave me alone. I'm not going to get up yet." She felt hot and heavy from her sleepless night; her head was sick and throbbing. "Go on. Go away."

Edith was well accustomed to Angela's tantrums; she ignored her and stooped unsteadily to light the gas fire.

"Your bath water's drawn, Miss," she said, straightening herself slowly. "Don't be long or it'll be getting cold."

"Go to hell," Angela muttered after her as she went out through the door. "Go to hell and leave me alone."

Edith took no notice and shut the door quietly behind her.

Alone, Angela soon reached the conclusion that, in spite of her bad night, she had little desire to stay in bed. Pouting childishly, she sat up against her pillows and reached for her tea cup. She took one sip, made a face, and put it down again.

"Stupid old ass," she muttered. "No sugar."

She got slowly out of bed and stretched herself. Slowly she stripped off her pyjamas, which clung clammily to her body, and stood naked in front of the hissing fire. Her long smooth limbs glowed and tingled in the comforting heat.

Languorously she turned round and sank down upon the sheepskin hearthrug. In the warmth she felt relaxed at last; her nerves were soothed; her body softened; her mind refreshed. Her experience of the night before gave way to time and sank into its rightful place in the past.

When Edith returned it was to find Angela lying stretched out on the rug, completely naked.

"Miss Angela!" she cried. "The very idea! What would your mother say?"

Angela sat up quickly. Before she could protest her fleecy bathrobe was wrapped about her shoulders. Her mood had changed; she wanted to be fussed, but that was something Edith would not do. So she allowed herself to be ushered into the warm, steamy bathroom to be left to her own devices. But she knew she could take her time. Her mother would have been downstairs an hour ago and would probably spend her entire morning sitting in the library writing long detailed letters to obscure relations. And Edith would not disturb her either. Bed making and room tidying would occupy her for an hour at least.

* * * *

A late breakfast of black coffee and dry toast, and several cigarettes restored Angela to normal. She had nothing of importance to do, and no inclination to do anything at all. For a long time she sat in the window of the morning-room, looking out over the ice-bound garden, slowly chain-smoking. She was thinking of Nigel Toler, and trying to decide whether or not she would go down to Shepperton that evening. She enjoyed dining at the 'Anchor', and in any case anything was preferable to staying at home here in Maidenhead. But even so, she was not at all sure that she was in the mood for long-drawn explanations.

She was on the point of deciding that she would probably be able to spend the evening quite well without Toler when the telephone bell rang. She snatched up the instrument.

It was Peter Vesey.

He apologized humbly, but insincerely for his bad behaviour.

He wanted to take her out dancing to Churchill's.

He said she was beautiful.

He said that he loved her.

She knew he had to go to New York on business tomorrow; he couldn't bear the thought of going all that way without seeing her again.

So it was that she decided to let Toler have his say. Peter Vesey could go to the devil so far as she was concerned, and she told him so.

As she slammed down the receiver she did not notice her mother come into the room.

Mrs. Sansom was a tall, handsome woman in her forties. There was beauty in her face and grace in her movements, but the continued absence of her husband, and the fiery, erratic presence of her daughter had left their mark.

"Angela," she said softly, "may I come in? I want to talk to you."

"Oh, Mother!" Angela replied irritably. "Not again! Can't you ever leave me alone?"

"I've left you alone far too much these last few years. It's about time someone brought you to your senses."

"Meaning what?"

"Look, my dear, I believe that all of us have to do something useful with our lives. I . . ."

"Oh, damn it, don't preach to me!"

"I'm not preaching. But it seems all wrong to me that while your father is out there in Berlin trying to patch up what there is left of the world and make it work again, you can spend most of your days in bed and your nights drinking gin in doubtful company. It's high time you did something useful with your life, and I won't rest until you do. You . . ."

"Oh, Mother, shut up! Shut up for God's sake!"

"No, I will not. You're a disgrace to me and to your father." For the first time in many months of strain, Mrs. Sansom raised her voice above its usual soft modulations. It was with difficulty that she went on. "I will write to your father and ask him to cancel your allowance. That should . . ."

Angela sneered: "Don't be ridiculous, Mother. You know he wouldn't do any such thing. I've ~~always~~ ^{always} got my own way with him and I always will."

Mrs. Sansom flushed. She realized she was beaten again. She stepped close to her daughter and gripped her by the shoulders.

"My goodness, Angela, I only wish I had the strength to give you what you deserve."

"Well you haven't, so stop preaching to me and go away." Angela roughly tore herself from her mother's grasp and swung round towards the window. Her voice rose: "Go away! For God's sake go away!"

Mrs. Sansom sighed. "Very well, Angela," she said. "I'll go. But remember this: one day, probably very soon, you're going to find yourself in trouble. Don't come crying to me when you do. I have done . . ."

"Go away, Mother! Please, please leave me alone!"

"I'm going, Angela. But I wish you would at least sit down and think things over."

With that Mrs. Sansom turned and left the morning-room and crossed the hall-way to the library. There in front of the fire she sat, reluctantly alone, and wept softly to herself.

* * * *

It was almost half-past seven before Angela drove up to the 'Anchor' and parked her car as ostentatiously as possible. The big grey Bentley worked wonders for her ego; it was her father's present on her twenty-first birthday, in direct contradiction of her mother's wishes. It was too big and powerful for a slip of a girl, but the Colonel thought he knew best.

She crossed the gravel path and climbed the steps into the hotel. She enjoyed the masculine glances that measured her, weighed her, stripped her, held her close, as she crossed the carpeted floor to the door of the restaurant. She had made her entrance in the grand fashion and her conceit was purring.

She turned to the waiter at the door.

"Mr. Toler?"

"Mr. Toler, Miss? Over here at the table by the window."

"Good evening, Mr. Toler," she cried loudly, while still some distance from his table.

Toler rose from his chair and bowed slightly.

"Ah, Miss Sansom," he said, "I hope you'll forgive me for settling myself in here like this. I did wait a while in the lounge, but I'd made up my mind that you weren't coming, and thought I might as well have dinner."

"I'm sorry I'm late," she smiled at him. She did not usually apologize, but he did not appreciate her compliment.

"That's perfectly all right. Would you like a sherry; they have some Bristol?"

"I'd love some."

Toler ordered the sherry and then said: "I hope you'll forgive my scruffy appearance, but I couldn't help it. My bags should have arrived from London this afternoon, but something must have delayed them."

"You've not been living out here long?"

"No," he replied. "Until a couple of days ago I was living in a private hotel in Kensington. I've been living in hotels since the war, and I had just about had enough of it. Then I was offered the bungalow at Laleham, fully furnished, and there we are. It's a bit off the beaten track, but it's good to get a spot of fresh air."

"You won't think it off the beaten track when the warm weather comes and the punts and what not come out on the river. You'll be longing for the peace and quiet of the metropolis."

"I'd forgotten about that. And I don't suppose it will be very long either. The nights are drawing out already even if it is so damn cold still. I watched it get dark as I sat here waiting." He looked at her and smiled.

She found herself studying him. He couldn't be less than forty, she thought. Yet although his eyes were tired and pouched, and despite his mousy shock of undisciplined hair, there was something attractive about him. Somehow he seemed . . . complete. Yes . . . complete was the word for it. Then she realized he was still talking to her.

". . . and of course it's nice to have a decent piano to play again, with no dear old ladies either telling me to be quiet or asking me to play *The Chocolate Soldier*. And I can play at any hour of the day or night I choose. I think I'll be able to tolerate the boating crowds."

"You play the piano a lot?" Angela could not have cared less, but it seemed the right thing to say.

"No. Not really. But I find it calms my nerves and it does help to kill time."

"Is that the only thing you kill?" she asked, with a touch of acid in her voice.

"*Touché!*" he laughed. "No, of course not, it's my business! Mothers-in-law one and sixpence, dear old grand-mammas half a crown. Full price list on application."

She laughed at his macabre humour, and realized that he was not likely to be disturbed by her thrusts. It was also obvious that he had no intention of discussing the affairs that had brought them together until he himself was ready. Throughout the meal, a very good meal, he would talk about nothing of any importance. But he chatted gaily enough and made her laugh. She was enjoying herself.

He suggested coffee and liqueurs in the lounge.

"I happen to know that they have a bottle of Green Chartreuse," he said, "and that is something that no one should lightly ignore. Do you like it—or would you prefer something less majestic? I expect they have . . ."

"No, no. I adore it."

"Splendid. That's settled then."

Five minutes later, seated in the lounge, he chuckled when she sipped her liqueur and closed her eyes in ecstasy. Then he straightened his face, cleared his throat self-consciously, and said: "I asked you to come here to-night so that I could explain what happened last night. But I'm not so sure now that it would serve any useful purpose."

"I think that after the way you man-handled me, I deserve an explanation whether you think it would serve a useful purpose or not."

He smiled and began to fill his pipe.

"You misunderstand me. I told you last night that I thought someone was going to try and kill me and I've no reason to believe that they've changed their minds. The point is this though: does it really matter to you how that state of affairs comes about? And if you really want to know the whole story, there's something I want to know about you first."

"What?"

"How did you come to be outside my window last night? Young women don't usually choose cold winter evenings to stroll along obscure tow paths, in evening dress, all by themselves."

"It's all rather silly." She coloured slightly. "Do you really have to know? Actually I was only going the long way round to Maidenhead, from Town."

"I'll say you were. And you chose a nice night for it." He paused to put a match to his pipe. "I'd feel much happier in my mind if I knew why you did that."

"But why? Does it matter?"

"Probably not. But when you have someone out to kill you, it's nice to know just where you stand with people. Won't you tell me?"

The story she told was essentially the truth, except that Peter Vesey was painted a little blacker, and she herself a little whiter than strict accuracy demanded. But the facts were there. When she had finished Toler chuckled.

"You're quite a girl, aren't you," he said.

"I'm glad you think so. Now suppose you say your piece."

"Right. But I won't tell you the whole sad story now, it would take too long. But briefly this is what happened. Before the war I was in Hong Kong for a while. When I'd been there a few months I cut across a man who ruined my career. I also found out that he was a spy. He was half-Jap, half-German. A tasty mixture. I know he's been in England for round about nine years, and if I could prove what I knew about him I could probably get him hanged. But the police don't even believe he exists—so I'm on my own. Until last Wednesday he might have vanished off the face of the earth for all I knew. Then I ran into him in Richmond. I'd been wandering round the antique shops looking for a present for a great-aunt of mine—the old duck is ninety next week. Finally I bought a lovely old silver candlestick in one of those shops down the back alleys—you know the places I mean. As I came out I turned to take another look in the window, and suddenly realized that someone was watching me. I turned round quickly and there at the end of the alley was this Eurasian bird. His name is Reismann. He looked as surprised to see me as I

was to see him. Without thinking I lifted the candlestick and flung it full in his face. I can still see the blood pouring from his mouth as he went down. I rushed forward, but before I could reach him two men jumped from a car that was drawn up across the end of the alley. They lifted him into the back seat and were away before I could do a thing. Fortunately no one had seen what had happened so I was able to get away without fuss. I went to a public call box and rang up an old friend of mine—chap called Nielson, who was in Hong Kong at the same time that I was and knows all about this Reismann chap—at the moment he—Nielson, that is—is Medical Officer at an R.A.F. station in Kent. He couldn't really help. Just said that the only thing I could do was to go home and hope for the best. But I knew right away that Reismann wouldn't leave it at that. I'd tried to kill him. There was no getting away from that, and I knew there was going to be trouble. Yesterday afternoon I went for a walk along the river. When I got back someone had typed a message on my paper, on my typewriter. It read: 'You had better make your will, Mr. Toler.'" He paused. "So there you have it."

She looked at him quietly. This was the sort of thing she had thought was fun. She was changing her mind.

"Why don't you go to the police?"

"I'd be wasting my time. They think I'm off my rocker." He glanced at his watch. "It's after nine o'clock, and I think we might be in for some fog, so if you have to get back to Maidenhead it might be a good thing if we called it a day."

"Yes. I think you may be right. It was a bit misty as I came down. Can I drive you back to Laleham?"

"That's very nice of you, but really, the walk would do me good."

"Not on a night like this. Come along." Quite suddenly she realized that she was trying to be pleasant to this man. She didn't know why. Somehow he seemed to demand it. They got to their feet and she turned so that he could drape her coat about her shoulders. Again she experienced that strange influx of strength and warmth as she felt his hands upon her. She turned her head and smiled at him. "Thank you," she said. "Shall we go?"

They stood for a moment in the brightly lit porch, looking out at the night.

"I think you were wrong about the fog," she said.

"I hope so, but you can smell it in the air."

"It isn't a nice night anyway."

"Where is your car?"

"It's over there by the 'King's Head'—the grey one."

"Nice car. Bentley, isn't it?"

"It is indeed. She's my pride and joy. Come along, I'm getting cold."

As they stepped out on to the path a car parked away to the left, by the church, switched on powerful headlights.

"See," laughed Toler, "everything laid on. Floodlights guide you to your car!"

But they had taken barely two steps forward when the car moved towards them, its engine racing to a scream in low gear.

"Christ!" yelled Toler.

Angela felt herself grabbed by the arm and flung forward towards her car.

Toler dived, grabbing her round the waist, bearing her down on to the ground in front of the Bentley's radiator.

The other car roared towards them across the gravel. Desperately Toler dragged his feet to safety. The car hurtled past, scouring a great swathe of paint from the Bentley's side as it went. Its tyres shrieked as it swayed round the corner and vanished up the road towards Halliford Bend.

Toler lay still for a moment and then heaved himself up on to his knees. Angela silent, deathly pale and trembling violently, looked up at him wide-eyed. Her face was scratched, her dress torn, and her stockings cut to ribbons by the gravel. No one came to assist them; no one had witnessed what had happened.

He pulled her up on to her feet.

"That wasn't an accident, Miss Sansom," he said gravely.

Her lips trembled and she gave a short, dry, half-hysterical laugh.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes. I think so. Let's get into the car. I don't want to get involved in anything."

She laughed again. He looked at her quickly.

"It's all right," she said weakly, "I'm not going to have hysterics. I'm not the type. It just struck me as funny that here we are calling each other Mr. Toler and Miss Sansom while we threaten each other and save each other's lives. Can't we do better than that?"

"Maybe we could."

He opened the door of the car and took her arm. She was still trembling violently.

"Shall I drive?" he asked.

"No. I'll be all right in a moment or so."

She got in and slid across into the driving seat. He sat down beside her and closed the door.

"I know you're Angela," he said. "And you can call me Nigel, if you want to."

"That's better. Nigel. I like that."

She started the engine and the car moved slowly forward. She felt even more unsure of herself than she had done the previous evening, but she was thankful for the drive down the deserted roads to Laleham Lock before she had to face the main roads on her way back to Maidenhead.

Neither of them spoke until she stopped the car on the tow path. She pulled on the hand brake and switched off the ignition. The engine died away.

"There's one question I'd like to ask you, Nigel," she said.

"About Reismann?"

"No. About last night."

"I thought, perhaps, we could forget about that," he said.

"It's all right." She smiled weakly. "I just wanted to ask you something, that's all."

"What then?"

"What was that music you were playing just before you started man-handling me?"

"Oh, that. It's nothing at all. Just a bit of improvisation."

"Nonsense. I've never heard anything like it."

"It's really very ordinary."

"Oh, damn it," she said, with a show of returning spirit. "I detest modesty. There's no need to run it down because you wrote it yourself."

"Look, Angela," he said, "I'm no composer. I'm very flattered, but it really isn't up to much. It must have been the moonlight."

"I don't think it was. I'd love to hear it again. Will you play it for me some time?"

"Of course I will if you want to hear it. How about now? Come in and have a drink. It's cold out here, and you still seem a bit shaken. Come on in. A drink will do you good."

"No. Not now, Nigel. I'm dead tired—hardly slept last night. You terrified me you know. I really must run along."

"I'm sorry about that. Really I am."

"Sorry I'm going, or sorry you frightened me?"

He laughed: "That's a leading question."

"Ungallant brute!" She tried to sound gay, but he could still feel her trembling in the seat beside him. She went on: "One more question, Nigel. Why did you have the windows open last night? It was bitterly cold."

"Oh, I'd been waiting there all evening. I felt shut in and stifled. I'd only opened them up a moment or two before you arrived."

"But the risk? From these people, I mean."

He grimaced. "I'm afraid," he said, "that I felt that if they decided to come, I wouldn't have stood a cat in hell's chance anyway. It was just in the lap of the gods. Even so, I coped with you quite smartly, didn't I?"

"I suppose you did." She paused. "I do wish I could help. Nigel, I will be able to see you again, won't I?"

"I hope so. By all means. . . . I'll ring you up. Good night."

He squeezed her hand and got quickly out of the car. As he strode across the gravel towards his home Angela opened her window.

"Nigel!" she called.

"Yes?" He stopped and turned his head.

"Come here a minute."

He walked back to the car and bent down to the open window.

"Here's my card," she said. "My phone number's on it."

Nigel took it from her and slipped it into his pocket.

"Thank you," he said. "Good night, Angela."

But before he could straighten up she had taken his head between her hands and kissed him on the mouth. For an instant her sharp little tongue pierced his lips like a dart.

It was a kiss designed to linger in the mind of a man.
Or in his heart.

3

By the time Angela reached the outskirts of Maidenhead she had regained her shattered composure. For the past five minutes she had been pressing the accelerator gradually closer and closer to the floor boards as her confidence came back to her. And as her confidence returned another change came over her. Her heart seemed to skip along the road before her. Some day, she told herself, he would hold her in his arms and tell her that he loved her. He must. There could never be another man in her life. Not now. She had said that before, but this time she meant it. She knew she did. This was no twinge of polyandrous guilt; no oath of continence to ease a troubled mind. This was it. She was happy. She was in love.

As she tiptoed upstairs to her room the grandfather clock on the landing struck eleven. Not for months had she been so early. A sliver of light still shone under the door of her mother's room. She ignored it. At that moment she could not bring herself to risk sharing this new exhilaration with anyone.

Singing softly to herself she undressed, in the darkness beside her bed, scattering her clothes about her on the floor. She filled the bowl with icy water and splashed it ecstatically over her face and body; rubbed the skin to a crisp glow with the soft turkish towel. She picked up her pyjamas, but somehow they seemed identified with the terror of the previous night. She threw them aside and slipped naked into bed. For some time she lay, but half awake, thinking of him. Then her tired mind slipped gracefully out into the main stream of sleep.

Next morning she rose early, and was in time to breakfast with her mother. Still glowing with her new-found happiness, she apologized to her mother for her behaviour on the previous morning and made her peace. Mrs. Sansom smiled at her and squeezed her hand.

"You know, my dear," she said simply. "So long as you are happy, very little else matters to me."

Angela stayed with her mother until lunch was over. Then, in the early afternoon, as if to give proof of her reformation, she offered to drive into Maidenhead to buy her mother some more knitting wool. But as she sat snugly behind the wheel of the Bentley her happiness was tinged with more sombre thoughts. What was going to happen? Maybe he wouldn't escape the next time a car bore down upon him out of the darkness. But she forced that thought from her mind. Why wouldn't the police believe him? Why did they think he was imagining things? And what had happened in Hong Kong? He must have been in the Air Force then. She remembered the wings on his cigarette-lighter. And this friend of his, this Medical Officer, he was in the R.A.F. But who was this Reismann? Where was it all going to end?

She arrived back home a few minutes after four. A thin sleety drizzle was falling and she welcomed the sight of the crackling log fire in the sitting-room. She greeted her mother with a light kiss on the forehead and handed her the wool she had bought.

"Go and take off your wet coat and come and sit by the fire with me," her mother said. "Edith will have the tea ready any minute now."

Angela went out into the hall only long enough to throw her coat hastily over the nearest chair, and hurried back to the fireside. The room was already growing darker; the sleet clouds were damping out what little light there was. Mrs. Sansom went on knitting in silence. At the opposite side of the hearth Angela sat and watched the firelight playing on her mother's face. She felt warm and peaceful and sleepy; it was difficult to be afraid of anything in such a room at such a time. Her eyes were just closing when her mother spoke.

"Oh, Angela dear," she said, without raising her head. "I forgot to tell you. It quite slipped my mind. A young man rang up, asking for you. He didn't give any name but he said he'd ring back later."

Angela sat up with a start. Part of the thrill that ran through her was fear.

"Oh, Mother!" she cried. "Why didn't you ask him for his number so that I could ring him?"

"Now don't get excited, darling. Edith took the call and she said that you would be home soon after four. I expect he'll be ringing again any minute now."

But it was not until almost five o'clock that the telephone bell rang. Angela sprang to her feet, knocking over a vase of flowers in her excitement, and rushed from the room. She grabbed the library telephone from its cradle.

"Hello!" she gasped anxiously.

"That you, Angela?"

"Yes. Oh, Nigel, I'm so sorry I was out when you phoned before. I . . ."

"Never mind that now. Look. I want your help. I think I'm on to something. Can you have your car at Swan and Edgar's at eight o'clock to-night?"

"Yes, I think so." She paused. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Listen, Angela, this is important. Can you do it? Without fail?"

"Yes, I can do it. Eight o'clock. Swan and Edgar's."

"Good girl. I'll explain when I see you. Bye, bye."

With that he rang off. Angela was piqued by his abruptness but had no intention of failing him. She went back to her mother and stood in front of the fire.

"That was Nigel, Mother. Remember, I told you about him this morning?"

"Oh, yes. The nice young man you met at that party in Laleham the other night. I do think Laleham is a lovely spot. I think . . ."

"Mother!" Angela interrupted, "I've got to go up to Town to meet him."

"Not to-night!"

"I'm sorry, darling, but I must."

"Oh, no, Angela! It's such a beastly night. Can't you put it off?"

"No, Mother, I must go." She stooped to kiss her mother's cheek. "It's important. I can't let him down."

"Very well then. But please try not to be late."

"I'll try, darling, but I can't promise anything because I don't know what he wants to do. And anyway I don't have to start for another hour yet."

The hour's delay, sitting in the sleepy dusk before the great log fire may have been a comfort to Mrs. Sansom, but to Angela it was purgatory. Important meant only one thing: danger. Last night was still too close to her. In her mind she could still hear that car screaming down towards them across the gravel. She could still hear Nigel saying: That wasn't an accident!

She sat down on the hearth, close beside her mother, and tried to wait patiently for the time to pass.

* * * *

That same morning Toler had risen early, after a restless night. In fact it was still quite dark when he went into his tiny kitchen to brew a pot of strong black coffee. This was his usual breakfast; some restless streak in his nature had always prevented him from settling down to eat until the day was well advanced. Somehow the hunger of the early morning seemed to stimulate his mind. But to-day no such stimulus was needed; it was now almost two days since he had received Reismann's warning; the strain of waiting was beginning to tell.

He poured the coffee, thick, black, and bitter, into a cup and carried it into the living-room, placing it carefully on the exact position on the piano, where, from experience, he knew that it would not rattle in sympathy with the vibrations of the sound board. He switched off the light and drew back the curtains. The sun was rising, filling the room with a damp grey light. A tug sounded its hooter in the lock outside. He flinched involuntarily. Sitting down at the keyboard he drained his cup without lowering it from his lips. Then for an hour he played to himself; but he did not listen to his music. The irregular spatter of the sleet on the windows seemed to grow louder and louder. His hands became clammy and his fingers refused to find the right notes. Then, with his hands poised over the keyboard, he froze. His scalp prickled; ectoplasmic fingers ruffled his hair. There was the unmistakable sound of a key turning in a lock. He waited motionless as the front door opened. A foot grated on the step. Then a shaky old voice called out and he remembered and relaxed.

"It's only me, Mr. Toler, sir, come to tidy up."

"All right, Mrs. Allen," Toler answered, passing his hand across his brow. He was trembling. The incident of the night before had left its mark upon him.

He started to play again in an effort to regain his tottering self-control. He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth firmly together. But the effort was wasted. For a few moments longer he played on. Then, with a vicious, helpless gesture, he crashed his fists down upon the keyboard. As the rending discord died away he rose to his feet and groped in his pockets for a cigarette. Finding one in a crushed carton he lit it unsteadily; but a moment later he flung it down, unsmoked, into the hearth. He paced nervously up and down the room, trying to sort out the turmoil which seethed in his brain; trying to think; trying to fight down his fear. Then he made up his mind. He decided to go up to London in the forlorn hope of picking up some clue to Reismann's whereabouts.

Without waiting to tell Mrs. Allen he was leaving, he donned his hat and coat and stepped out through the french windows.

It was a long, cold, disheartening walk along the river bank to Chertsey bridge. When he got there he had to wait for almost an hour for a bus to take him into Hounslow. He realized, as he waited, that he could have got into London much quicker by going down into Chertsey itself and catching a train to Waterloo. Yet it was strange, as he stood there in the driving wind, he knew he was doing right. Kismet. The longest route would be the shortest. But in his mind there lurked foreboding.

Piccadilly Circus was drab and dank when at last he climbed the steps up from the Underground. Heavy swirls of grey sleet almost obscured the statue of Eros, standing proud on his Victorian pedestal. With half-closed eyes he looked up at the low leaden sky. Then, turning his collar up about his ears, he walked slowly up Shaftesbury Avenue. It seemed logical that he should start his search in Soho.

With his shoulders hunched and his hat pulled down to shield his eyes from the driving sleet he could see little besides his own two feet, sliding one after the other over the

greasy pavements. Disjointed memories passed kaleidoscopically through his brain.

Laleham Lock. . . .

Henley regatta that summer before the war. . . .

Dawn at Stonehenge on midsummer's day. . . .

The evening sun on the minarets of Baghdad. . . .

The sacred Ganges: the burning ghats. . . .

The filthy Yellow River . . .

Yellow River; yellow silk; yellow hair. . . .

Moonlight. . . .

Moonlight on golden hair, so long ago. . . .

Golden hair; black hair. . . .

The blue-black hair of Mu Tung Ho. . . .

Reismann. . . .

Mu Tung Ho. . . .

It crossed his mind that although he had worshipped the memory of Mu Tung Ho for all these years he had never kissed her; never so much as touched her hand. Was it true that he loved her? He did not know. At that moment her place in his mind was under siege. As he walked on, the memories of her were crowded out of his mind by thoughts of Angela Sansom. Thoughts which he could not control. The cool touch of her lips as she had taken his face between her hands; the yielding suppleness of her body which he had sensed rather than felt; the soft warmth of her presence beside him in the car; the beauty of her smile. He longed to hold her in his arms and crush her slender body against him. Lust or love? He could not answer that. It came to him with a twinge of regret that he could not remember the last time he had made love to a woman.

The kaleidoscope stopped.

A scream of brakes jerked him suddenly back to reality. He was standing in the middle of Rupert Street with the radiator of a taxi not six inches from him. A wave of shock swept through his body as he spun round to face the gesticulating driver. Then a second shock ran through him. Without giving the man another glance he set off at a sprint up Shaftesbury Avenue. As he turned into Wardour Street he slipped and fell heavily on the greasy pavement. His hat rolled into the gutter. Without pausing to retrieve it he

scrambled to his feet and ran on. Just before he reached Ley On's he stretched out his hand and grasped the arm of the slender, black-haired girl who was picking her way daintily through the crowds.

"Cherry Blossom!" he gasped breathlessly.

She turned her fine oriental head and looked at him. Her eyes at first were blank. Then with a slight movement of her eyebrows she seemed to recognize him. He held her tightly by the arm, lost for words. A taxi drew in to the kerb less than a yard away from them. A big oily man climbed out. Under his over-padded jacket he was wearing a navy blue shirt and a white tie. He turned to watch a woman step from the cab. She was flashily dressed in a tight black suit; the narrow skirt was slit up the back almost to her stocking tops. It was strange that in his speechless, anguished amazement, Toler should have paid them heed. Pimp and prostitute? The very sight of them sickened him. As they turned away the Chinese girl saw them. She flashed him a quick, frightened glance and tore herself from his grasp. She ran on up Wardour Street as fast as her tiny feet would carry her.

As he started after her it came to him that, before, he had only called her Cherry Blossom in his mind. Perhaps if he had called her Mu Tung Ho there would have been a brighter light in her eyes. Perhaps she would not have run away.

On and off the pavement he ran, jostling his way through the dreary, sleet bespattered, cosmopolitan throng of Soho. She was less than ten yards ahead now.

"Hey!" he cried desperately.

But before he could reach her and stop her flight a strong hand grabbed him by the arm. He spun round and found himself looking into the solemn face of a young police constable.

"'Ere, 'ere," said the man, "'old on. Where d'you think you're going?"

"Let me go. You don't understand!"

"Now, now. Calm down. You can't go doing that sort of thing."

"I've got to get her. Let go of me! Don't be a fool, man!"

"Suppose you just calm down and tell me what you think you're doing."

Toler tried desperately to tear himself free from the constable's grasp. But with a practised hand the man twisted his hand sharply round behind his back and held it firmly.

"I think," said the constable calmly, "that you'd better come along with me."

"Where?"

"I'm taking you to the station. Come on."

Toler relaxed.

"All right, Officer," he said wearily, "you can let go. I won't make a fuss. It's too late now anyway."

Toler walked along in silence beside the constable, all the way to Savile Row, feeling cold and humiliated. His mind was blank and cold and heavy. He felt beaten.

As the constable led him in through the doors of the police station the sergeant at the desk looked up.

"What's this?" he said, rather than asked.

"Caught this chap trying to catch a Chinese woman in Wardour Street. He seemed desperate, so I brought him in."

"I see," said the sergeant. Then turning to Toler: "Well?"

"It's all a mistake. I thought I recognized her and wanted to speak to her, that's all."

The sergeant smiled.

"Look, sir," he said. "If I had a pound for everyone who was brought in here by mistake, as you put it, I'd be a very rich man. You'll have to do better than that."

Toler realized that he was not going to get away without going into details. And he was in a hurry. Mu Tung Ho was somewhere in Soho. He had to find her.

"Very well," said Toler. "Some years ago I reported a very serious matter to Scotland Yard, and either they couldn't do anything, or they didn't believe me. This is all part of it. I'll explain what happened in Wardour Street, but I must see your superior officer."

The sergeant thought for a moment, then turned to the constable.

"Wait there," he said. "I'll see if the inspector will see him."

Two minutes later Toler was sitting facing Inspector Carew across a desk.

"In 1940," he began, "I saw Superintendent Henderson, at Scotland Yard, about a man I believed was a spy. I suppose you can find out what I told him if you're interested. He didn't believe me anyway. If I tell you what concerns this morning's episode, I suppose that will do for now."

"Go on," said the inspector.

"At one time I was an R.A.F. test pilot, and just before the war I was sent out to Hong Kong to test a Japanese fighter plane that had come into our hands. We weren't at war with Japan, of course, but the writing was on the wall. I think we got the plane from the Flying Tigers . . . you know, the Yanks who were fighting for the Chinese in the Sino-Jap war. Anyway it was all hush hush.

"The night before I was due to fly this kite I went into Kowloon for a meal. I was stationed at Kai Tak, of course—you may have heard of it. Anyway, on the outskirts of Kowloon, on a side road running north to the Chinese border, there was a restaurant that I often went to. It was a lovely old Chinese building surrounded by cherry trees. As you walked up the path you were always met by a Chinese girl whose grace and beauty were things I shall never forget."

Toler looked down at the floor and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I might as well tell you, I suppose," he went on, "that I loved her. You can be shocked if you like. Her name was Mu Tung Ho—but I always called her Cherry Blossom, or at least that's the way I always think of her. I suppose that sounds rather silly but . . ."

"Go on," said the inspector.

Toler straightened himself.

"On this particular evening I went there for a quiet meal. I ate alone and watched her as she moved gracefully about among the tables. She gave no sign that she even knew me, but I was satisfied so long as I could see her.

"I had finished my meal and she came over and offered me a cigarette from an old ivory box. That was all part of the hospitality shown to all her guests. It was a long Russian cigarette of a kind you don't see in England nowadays. I'd taken two or three puffs before I realized that I

didn't feel too well. I didn't associate it with the cigarette.

"I decided to go back to my quarters and rest a while. Then my head started to ache. It was a horrible splitting pain. I felt as if hot steel wedges were being driven into my ears. I got to my feet and staggered across the room with my head clutched in my hands. Then I blacked out.

"The next thing I remember is lying in bed in the sick bay at Kai Tak, with my pillow soaked with blood. Some Eurasian doctor had done what he described as an emergency brain operation on me and then vanished off the face of the earth. And the Jap kite went up in flames for no apparent reason. I was grounded and shipped back to England as soon as I was fit to travel. I never saw Mu Tung Ho again.

"I'm sure that cigarette was drugged, and I think the operation on me was to make sure that kite stayed on the ground until it could be destroyed.

"Anyway, that's the story. I believe that the man who operated on me is here in England, but Henderson thinks the operation affected my mind and I'm imagining things. I thought that girl this morning was Mu Tung Ho, but I think I must have been mistaken."

"I see," said the inspector. "Just a minute."

He picked up the telephone, and spoke for several minutes with Scotland Yard. Then:

"All right, Mr. Toler, you can go. But let me give you a bit of advice. Don't go looking for trouble in Soho. It doesn't pay. If you find anything that concerns the police, always come and tell us right away, and then go home and leave it to us. O.K.?"

* * * *

But when Toler was once more out in the street he had no intention of going home and leaving it to the police. He had not been mistaken. It had been Mu Tung Ho. He had to find her. He had to be sure, apart from anything else, that she had not willingly given him that cigarette. But first he had to speak to Nielson.

As he paused for a moment on the pavement the constable who had arrested him strode past.

"Oh, Officer! Just a minute."

"Yes, sir? Oh, it's you, sir. Sorry about that but . . ."

"That's all right, Officer, you have your duty to do. But tell me, there can't be many Chinese in Soho, did you recognize that girl?"

"So far as I know, sir, she dances in a cabaret somewhere."

Toler smiled.

"I must have been mistaken then. Thank you, Officer."

Toler strode away and stepped into the first telephone box he encountered. But Nielson was not to be traced. Toler managed, after considerable argument, to speak to the commanding officer at the airfield in Kent where Nielson was stationed. Squadron Leader Nielson had gone on leave that morning. That was all. Frustrated, Toler crashed the telephone back into its stirrup.

He rang up Nielson's club, but he had not been seen there for several weeks. Neither had he checked in at any of the hotels he was accustomed to use when on leave.

Then as a last resort he put through a trunk call to Nielson's home in Hertfordshire and spoke to Mrs. Nielson. She assured him that her husband was not there and was not expected until the following day.

As he left the telephone box Toler felt close to panic. He was cold and shivering, mentally and physically. For an hour he wandered through the back streets of Soho, which have been rendered alternately romantic and forbidding by half-truth and rumour. He was lost in a maze; a Theseus, without a guiding, comforting string, searching for a subtler Minotaur. He felt certain that Reismann was somewhere close at hand. Where? If he could find Mu Tung Ho, he knew that he would find Reismann. Why had she been so frightened? She was terrified, he was sure of that. What was Reismann doing with her? At the hands of such a man womanhood conferred no privileges. Had she been seen with him? Had he been recognized holding her by the arm? What then? What was happening to her now, as he walked alone through the greasy streets? He felt sick. Cold sweat was running down his spine as he turned from one back street into the next.

It was a long time since he had been in the West End of

London, and he had never heard of a Chinese restaurant which put on a cabaret, or for that matter of any cabaret that featured a Chinese dancing girl. But he could not be sure. He badly wanted to ask some passer-by if they knew of such a place, but he restrained himself. He felt that a word in the wrong ear might quite well jeopardize the life of Mu Tung Ho. Often he had heard it said that news travelled through the alleys of Soho as quickly as if it were broadcast from the rooftops. He paused to light a cigarette in a doorway. As he looked up a young soldier, barely out of his teens, grinned at a painted jade coming up in the opposite direction; she smiled at him and they went off, arm in arm. Somehow she did not revolt Toler as the slit-skirted harlot of the earlier hour had done. A police constable strode solemnly past. Toler's first instinct was to ask his help, but he held himself back. He had had enough of the police for one day. And at that moment he felt he could trust no one.

Stepping out into the driving sleet once more, he walked slowly along for about a dozen yards. He stopped short at the entrance to a dark, narrow alleyway. Screwed to the wall at the side was a board about twelve inches square on which was painted a small green dragon. There was no wording: only a tiny oriental character in one corner.

He clenched his fists and crept cautiously into the gloom with his cigarette drooping from his lips. This was no hunch. He was certain. After about twenty feet the alley opened up into a small, ill-lit yard. The floor was swept clean and the walls were whitewashed up to the gutterings. No windows opened on to the yard and there was only one door. It was quite circular and there were no hinges visible. Toler moved closer. The circular door frame was enamelled bright yellow; the door itself was crimson; in the centre was a small green dragon with wicked little red eyes. Above hung a lantern of pierced Chinese bronze. At one side, fitted flush with the wall, was a bronze framed menu written in Chinese and English. At the other side a similar frame held the photograph of a Chinese girl in national costume, and the announcement: "The Lady of the Almond Trees will dance at 11 p.m."

Almond trees? . . . Cherry trees.

The girl's face was turned away but Toler, unreasoning, had no doubts.

He raised his head. Above the door he read, in green enamel uniform, the name: 'THE DRAGONS OF KUNMING.'

He slowly closed his fingers round the handle that hung beside the door then, gritting his teeth, he jerked it viciously. Somewhere in the depths of the building a bell clanged hollowly. He waited for several minutes and then rang again. When there was again no answer an incomprehensible sense of weirdness swept over him. But he realized that he was wasting his time. Keeping his eyes fixed on the door he backed slowly away up the alley. The only intelligent thing to do was to come back that evening when 'The Dragons' was open. But he did not want to come alone; he reasoned that if anything went wrong he would need someone with him who could get away.

Where was Nielson? If he were to come Toler knew he would feel much happier. When he came into Soho Square he stepped into the first telephone box he saw and dialled the number of Nielson's club. The result was the same as before. Five further calls failed to trace him. Toler was worried. He felt that it would be madness to go alone. But he could not think of anyone but Joe he could call upon.

He was just about to leave the telephone box when he thought of Angela. She had said that she wanted to help. It occurred to him that if he went with a woman he was less likely to attract undue attention. He paused for a moment of indecision and then picked up the phone once more. Again he was unlucky; Angela was not at home.

Toler stepped out of the box into the street and walked slowly along until he reached Charing Cross Road. By this time the sleet had stopped falling but the heavy sky hinted at snow during the coming night. He stopped to peer thoughtfully into the window of a book shop, then, seeing his reflection in the glass, he realized that he was soaking wet and wearing his oldest clothes. He would have to get something better for the evening. He thought for a moment and hailed a taxi.

Forty minutes later he had succeeded in hiring a dinner jacket which fitted him tolerably well. As he came out of the shop, with the fibre case under his arm, a twinge from

his stomach brought it to him that he had not eaten that day. He went to a Corner House and ate a meal that he needed but did not want. He had no coherent thoughts, no hopes, no fears, no plans. His brain had spun itself to stagnation.

His meal finished, he hailed a cab, which took him to an hotel where he was able to book a room.

For some time he lay on the bed, wearily trying to think. Then he got up and changed into his hired suit. It was not until he was knotting his tie that he thought to look at his watch. It was ten minutes to five.

He anxiously went to the telephone and asked for the exchange. Two minutes later he heard Angela's voice, husky and expectant, in the earphone.

4

THE Guinness' clock had only just passed eight when, Angela's long sleek Bentley drew into the kerb outside Swan and Edgar's. Toler was surprised; it had never occurred to him that she could be punctual. He got in quickly beside her.

"Thanks for coming," he said. "But I do need a spot of help to-night."

"That's all right. What are we going to do?"

"We've got plenty of time, and I think I should explain before we start rushing into things. Will you drive somewhere where we can stop and talk for a few minutes?"

"How about Bloomsbury? We could park there all right."

"Right."

As the lights changed, she swung the car round into Shaftesbury Avenue. She could feel the tenseness of his nerves as he sat beside her. She had turned into Charing Cross Road and gone on into Tottenham Court Road before she spoke.

"Tavistock Square do?" she said.

"Fine. We won't be long."

As she pulled up on the quiet western side of Tavistock Square, he turned to her and said: "You look very beautiful to-night."

Her heart leapt, but somehow she managed to say, with a well-controlled smile: "Thank you. . . . What's going to happen to-night?"

"You remember I told you that I was in Hong Kong when all this business started?"

"Yes."

"You remember I told you that my career was ruined by a Eurasian called Reismann?"

"Yes."

"He was a surgeon, and he fixed me by performing an

operation on my brain. What he did, I've never been able to find out, but it stopped me flying once and for all."

"So you were in the Air Force then?"

"I thought I told you."

"No, but I guessed. But how did this Reismann manage to do an operation on you? I'd have thought it would be impossible unless he kidnapped you."

"He did, only it didn't look like it. He had me issued with a drugged cigarette that made me seem ill, and operated as an emergency measure. That's how crafty he is."

"But why did he do it?"

"That doesn't matter now. I'll tell you some other time. The point is this. That cigarette was given me by a Chinese girl with whom I was in love. I think I saw that girl in London to-day and I think I know where she is. I think that where we find her we'll find Reismann."

"I see."

Toler was surprised that Angela had not commented on his reference to Mu Tung Ho, but colour bars were things which had neither point nor importance so far as Angela was concerned. Toler was relieved; most people would not understand.

Angela went on: "Where are we going?"

"Ever heard of a Chinese restaurant called 'The Dragons of Kunming'?"

"Yes. Went there about a month ago for dinner. Didn't like it."

"Did you see the floor show?"

"No. Why?"

"I think this girl is part of it. I want to make sure."

"Chinese dancing girl, eh? Anything for a bit of a change."

"Shall we go then? I think you might be able to park the car in Golden Square."

"Right."

She started the engine and swung the car round to the left. A moment later they were back in Tottenham Court Road. Right turn into Oxford Street, and then to the left into Soho.

They were lucky. Although it was Friday night the weather had kept the crowds out of the West End. They

were able to find parking space in Golden Square without difficulty. Angela switched off the engine.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. "And where do I come in?"

"We go to 'The Dragons of Kunming' and have dinner and wait as patiently as we can for the floor show, or rather for the 'Lady of the Almond Trees', as they call her. I've got to be completely sure that this Chinese dancer is really Mu Tung Ho before I can do anything. If she is, then I'm going to try to follow her. You sit tight at the table and wait. If I'm not back in half an hour you must go straight away and try to get in touch with Squadron Leader Nielson." He paused to slip a card into her hand. "Ring all the numbers on this card and keep on trying until you do get him. Tell him the whole story and do exactly as he says. . . . Understand?"

"Yes, I understand, Nigel."

He turned to her and took her hand.

"Before we go," he said, "I want to make one thing quite clear. It may be dangerous to-night—you know what happened in Shepperton—and this is the time to back out if you don't want to go through with it. After all, there's no reason in the world why you should stick your neck out on my account."

She leaned towards him.

"I'm not afraid," she said.

"Then I think . . ."

He was stopped by the pressure of soft warm lips on his. Eager, trembling lips. He pushed her gently away. His heart was beating faster.

"I think we'd better go," he said hoarsely.

He helped her from the car and for a moment, as they turned to walk away, he slid his arm around her and squeezed her to him. She was happy then.

When they reached the mouth of the alley she was clinging tightly to his arm. They had not spoken since they left the car in Golden Square.

"This is it," he said softly. "O.K.?"

"O.K."

Three small lights, set in the wall, rescued the alley from total darkness, but as they made their way along she

instinctively tightened her grip on his arm. To her the place seemed fundamentally evil. As they came into the yard a dim circle of light showed where the door had been; a small illuminated notice proclaimed that 'The Dragons of Kunming' was open.

They stepped cautiously into the cylindrical porch and pushed their way through the heavy curtain which closed the farther end. They found themselves in a small circular hall, hung from floor to ceiling with rich orange velvet. A girl came out from behind the curtains and walked towards them. A pretty girl; her skirts were much too short; her dress too tight.

"Good evening, sir," she said. She smiled, showing her teeth; nice white teeth.

Toler gave her his hat and coat and received a small ivory check in return. She smiled again and turned away. Toler did not notice her gently swaying hips and slender ankles as she walked away across the rich orange carpet. He was worried. He looked around the hall. The rich hangings; the deep carpet; the elaborately carved newel post at the head of the broad stairs which swept downwards out of sight. It all seemed so solid; so well established. The roundness, the orange-ness, the opulence, were dazzling.

"Nigel. Nigel!" Angela whispered urgently, tugging at his sleeve. "Come along. We can't stand here."

He looked down at her and smiled. He gave her his arm and they set off down the sweeping staircase. Half-way down they were met by a smiling oriental waiter. He was not Chinese. Malay? He led them down into a large circular room in the centre of which was a small circular dance floor, crowded with shuffling people. On the far side of the floor was a curved dais on which a dance band was playing. The music desks were circular; so were the curtained arches on either side of the platform. Incongruously, the clock on the wall was square.

They sat down at the table to which the waiter had guided them and, for some moments, they did not speak. They could not share the gaiety of the dancers, diners and drinkers, who chattered and laughed in that strange round room.

"What do we do now?" Angela asked in a whisper.

"We eat. We've got quite a time to wait, and anyway it's time for dinner." He opened the menu. "What would you like?"

"I'd like the same as I had the last time I came here."

"What was that?"

"Oyster soup, turbot, and a small welsh rarebit."

He wagged his finger at her.

"You, young woman, are a philistine. Do you mean to tell me that you'd come to a Chinese restaurant and eat European food?"

"I don't like the idea of eating chop suey and all that sort of stuff. I always imagine it's dirty."

He gave a short laugh and then chuckled.

"Chop suey is an American citizen; it certainly isn't Chinese. Suppose you let me order you something easy to start with, and then you can try it. And if you don't like it I'll have them scour London for turbot for you."

"All right then, I'll risk it."

"Well I suggest we have a lobster omelet and some . . ."

"Do they make omelets in China?" she interrupted.

"They were making omelets before the French knew what eggs were."

"Good gracious. All right then, and what do we have with it? I didn't mean to interrupt."

"I suggest some chow min."

"What's chow min?"

"Oh, noodles, bean shoots and little bits of chicken and what not."

"It sounds revolting, but I'll try anything once."

Toler beckoned the waiter. The man bowed obsequiously and bared his golden teeth in a meaningless smile.

Toler gave their order and then said: "Oh, and can we have something to drink?"

"I send wine waiter," the man said, and turned away.

When the man had gone Toler said: "You don't know what you've been missing not having had Chinese food. I don't think there's anything to touch it. The Chinese treat cooking as an art—the way they do everything else. You should study Chinese cooking, Angela. They have all sorts of fascinating theories about it. They . . ."

Toler stopped talking as Angela laid her hand on his.

"You don't have to entertain me you know," she said. "I'm feeling just about as jumpy as you are, and I think I can bear up all right."

He smiled at her.

"That's very sweet of you," he said, "but we've got quite a time to wait, and as nothing is likely to happen unless we start it we might as well try to enjoy our dinner as much as we can. And anyway, I like talking, and it's a very long time since I had anyone quite as nice as you to talk to."

She smiled at him, eyes gleaming. She felt herself rise to his compliments like a silly teenager. And she didn't mind at all.

Then came the wine waiter, smug and sleek, with his wine list tucked elegantly under his arm.

After a little discussion they decided upon a bottle of Liebfraumilch '45. When the man had gone their food arrived. Steaming dishes were set down before them.

"Shall we eat?" said Toler.

Angela transferred a large cylindrical omelet to her plate and then gingerly took a very little of the steaming chow min.

"Here, sprinkle it with this," he said, handing her the bottle of soya sauce.

She made a face, and complied with his instructions.

But as soon as she tasted the food her expression changed to delight.

"I see what you mean," she said.

"Splendid," he said. "You know, it's a funny thing, but I feel quite all right now; I felt like hell this afternoon. You must do me good."

Angela flashed her eyes at him. She could listen to remarks like that all night.

They ate well, but throughout the meal Toler kept looking carefully around him. Half the room was cut off from his eyes by the crowded dance floor; the part he could see was only dimly lit.

Then his eyes rested on the Chinese woven silk pictures which adorned the curving walls, his mind swung back to Mu Tung Ho. He looked at his watch. It was 9.40. Eighty minutes to go. He looked at Angela. She was lovely. He

knew he wanted her. But could he love her as he had loved Mu Tung Ho?

They talked. He told her about Hong Kong and then about India.

It was nearly 10.15.

Her father was in the Allied Control Commission in Berlin. Just an office job really, but her mother worried about him.

10.28.

He told her how he had loved the desert when he was stationed in Iraq in 1934. Not everyone liked the desert.

Again he looked at his watch—he had his back to the clock—it was ten thirty-five. He couldn't stand this waiting very much longer. Each minute his nerves were becoming more raggetty; the palms of his hands were clammy.

10.44.

Suddenly he took her hand in his.

"I don't know you very well, Angela," he said softly, "but you've been splendid the way you've put up with me. Just in case anything goes wrong to-night I want you to know I think you're an angel. Your folks named you well."

She drew her hand away and smiled.

"Nothing is going to go wrong," she said.

"No; everything will be all right."

"I think you're sweet—but don't be disappointed if I'm not all you think I am."

"Sufficient unto the day—and if you do get into a tantrum I think I'll be able to deal with you."

"Cave man!" she laughed.

10.58.

The band stopped playing. The dancers left the floor. The lights dimmed slowly and then went out. For several seconds the room lay in silent darkness, punctuated by the glow of innumerable cigarettes. Toler felt his spine prickle; Angela's hand squirmed into his and tightly gripped his fingers.

A gong sounded softly. A spotlight stabbed downwards from an aperture in the ceiling. In the centre of the dance floor a girl, dressed in heavily embroidered yellow silk, crouched in an attitude of obeisance. The band had gone;

four oriental musicians sat cross-legged in front of the dais. The gong sounded again. With infinite grace the dancer rose to her feet. Toler felt himself trembling. She turned her head.

Without doubt, it was Mu Tung Ho!

She swept back her head and spread her arms wide in an appealing gesture. The musicians started to play a thin, incomprehensible tune. Far away Angela's voice murmuring. . . .

"Steady, Nigel. Steady."

Subconsciously he was comforted by her voice but no words reached him.

For what seemed a very long time, Mu Tung Ho danced the slow traditional figures to the strange, discordantly fascinating music of her native land. Not until she sank again to the floor did the audience make a sound. Then they broke into an ecstasy of applause. But Mu Tung Ho did not move. The spotlight went out and, after a short interval of total darkness, the dim house lights came on again.

The Lady of the Almond Trees had vanished.

The orchestra was once more in its place. The leader lifted his clarinet to his lips and began to play a slow American foxtrot. The dancers returned to the floor, and the serenity of the East was swamped by the sensuality of the West.

Toler's face was beaded with sweat as he turned to Angela.

"This is it," he said hoarsely. "Remember what I told you. Wait half an hour, then go home. Go straight home as fast as you can. That'll be the safest thing to do. Take care of yourself."

He rose to his feet and made his way across the crowded room. Had he waited he might have caught Angela's murmured farewell:

"Good luck, my darling."

* * * *

Toler pushed aside the heavy curtains which hung across the circular archway on the left-hand side of the dais, and stepped through into a dimly lit, white-washed corridor.

The curtains swung together behind him, stifling the sounds of the noisy restaurant. His hands were trembling, yet he felt strangely calm. He stood with his back to the wall and looked carefully around him. Ten yards from where he stood the corridor turned sharply to the right. Just before the bend was a door, roughly daubed with green paint, obviously leading to a room which lay directly behind the dais. The passage was deserted. There were no sounds except those which filtered through the curtains at his side. He waited a moment longer and then crept silently forward. Reaching the door he paused, listening carefully. Still there was no sound. He slowly turned the knob and allowed the door to swing into the room. At first he thought the room was in darkness. Then he realized that heavy curtains were hung from ceiling to floor some four or five feet from the wall. From beneath the curtains there showed a thin sliver of light. But the room was in silence.

From somewhere round the corner in the passage, footsteps were approaching. Without thinking he stepped into the room and carefully closed the door behind him. As the catch slipped into its mortice he stiffened. There was no handle on the inside of the door.

* * * *

Angela sat and waited. Every few seconds she glanced at the tiny jewelled watch on her wrist, then checked it against the square-faced clock on the wall. She was trembling. As soon as Nigel's square, stocky figure had vanished through the archway, she had had a feeling that all was not well. She could feel the corners of her mouth twitching, her lips quivering. She wanted to stand up and scream.

The band played ceaselessly. Even when the other instruments were resting the pianist kept up his monotonous vamping, with a dreary furbelow for embellishment here and there, to which some few of the dancers continued to shuffle round the floor. The music seemed to grow louder and louder. Her mind was swamped and flooded by the strident growls of the brass and the gluey wails of the reeds. The minutes passed slowly and unwillingly.

A waiter came and bowed beside the table. Before he

could speak she sent him away with a peremptory wave of her hand. As he turned to go he cast her a curious glance. She suddenly felt horribly alone. She breathed deeply and passed the tip of her tongue over her lips. Fear was clawing its way up into her brain. She looked at her watch again. Five more minutes to go. She raised her left hand and held her finger-tips tremulously to her lips. Before she realized what she was doing she took the nail of her index finger between her teeth and tore off the sharply pointed tip. She lowered her hand and gazed at the damaged nail, blunt and ragged and ugly. She had never bitten her nails before. She felt ashamed and hid her hand beneath the table. She held the broken fragment of nail tightly between her teeth and waited, counting her heart-beats.

Only two minutes left. Nigel was not going to come back. She was sure of that. Something had happened; something horrible. She felt dazed. Things like this didn't happen in England. A man didn't leave his dinner table and vanish. Not in England.

But the clock stood at eleven-forty.

She rose from her chair and threw her coat over her arm. As she turned, her cold hands plucked involuntarily at the lace collar of her simple black dress. Her face felt stiff. The waiter's eyes followed her as she picked her way between the tables towards the staircase.

Incongruously a stream of petty thoughts bustled through her mind as she walked shakily up the shallow stairs. Were the seams of her stockings straight?

The drunk lolling at the bottom of the stairs . . . could he see up her legs as she rose above him? The place and its atmosphere was unclean. Despite its luxury there was something nasty; she had felt it that time before when she had no reason to be afraid.

As she reached the circular, orange-curtained hall she stopped. A man in an ill-fitting suit stood at the far side, a cigarette dangling from his lips. He looked at her squarely from head to feet. His mouth twisted. He let the cigarette drop from his lips on to the carpet and ground it beneath his heel. He still looked at her, not blinking. Suddenly her heels became too high, her dress too thin, too tight. She glanced about her nervously. There was no one else.

She took a step forward, unsteadily. The man raised his arm and drew aside the curtain.

"Good night, Madame," he said, with an exaggerated bow.

Angela blindly seized her chance. Rushed past him, through the black cylindrical porch, out into the yard. The cold stagnant air tasted sweet, but it was terrifyingly dark. She gulped and ran along the alley. But before she could reach the street she was grabbed by the arm. She dropped her coat and screamed. Strong arms encircled her, drawing her up tightly against the body of a man who smelt sickeningly of stale beer, tobacco and dirt.

"Nar lidy," he grunted, "we wants yer."

Angela-screamed again.

Her mind spun in a whirlpool of panic. There was only one thing she could do. She twisted herself in his grasp and brought her knee up between his legs. Hard. She felt the seam of her narrow skirt rip open. The man released her, gasped and doubled up, toppled to the ground, groaning helplessly.

For a moment she stood, fascinated, looking down at the black writhing mass in the deeper blackness around. . . . The lights were no longer burning. Then she turned and fled, sobbing, towards her car.

Mercifully, as if sensing her plight, the engine, ice cold though it was, fired at her first touch on the starter button.

5

TOLER stood motionless, trying to think. He had walked into a trap. Before he could move a voice came from behind the curtains:

"Come in, Mr. Toler, I have been expecting you. Come along in."

The voice of Doctor Reismann, smooth and confident.

A woman laughed.

"Come on, Mr. Toler," she said. "Don't keep the Doctor waiting." Her voice was shrill and harsh.

Toler hesitated a moment, then bit his lip and pushed his way through the curtains. Behind a big mahogany desk sat a man with his face swathed in bandages. His arms were folded across his chest and his head was thrown back so that it almost touched the dull black velvet curtains which hung in a circle completely round the room. But it was not the sight of the man that drained the blood from Toler's face. It was the woman. A woman in a tight black skirt. Bold, hard eyes in a painted face. Toler lurched forward.

"Sammy!" she snapped.

Thick, strong arms encircled his body and held him motionless. Vainly he tried to struggle and then relaxed, swearing.

The man behind the desk did not move. He spoke in the same calm tones as before.

"Do not be stupid, Mr. Toler. I have been expecting you for some time. Do you think I would give you a chance to molest me a second time?" He fingered the bandage which covered his face.

Toler swore again. The invective poured venomously from his lips. Reismann waited for him to finish.

"And now Mr. Toler," he said, "having relieved your feelings in typical English fashion, perhaps you would take a seat. My man will assist you."

Toler was half pushed, half carried, across the floor to-

wards the chair which stood beside the desk. It was black and blunt and square. The back consisted of a single upright post, at the top of which were two rows of brass studs of varying lengths. While the man held him the woman strapped his arms and legs to the chair. Within thirty seconds he was helpless. Then for the first time Toler saw the man who had held him. He had been with the woman that morning when she had alighted from the taxi in Wardour Street. The patch of nausea in his stomach swelled.

The woman smiled down into his face. Stale powder caked in the creases beneath her glassy eyes. She ran her fingers through his hair, then jerked it viciously.

"Yes we saw you, Romeo," she purred. "We saw you and now you're going to pay. By God you're going to pay. You can't oppose Mitsumu and get away with it."

"That's enough, Cora," Reismann said smoothly. "I will ring if I want you. Go."

The woman walked across the room to a gap in the curtains, swinging her hips so that her skirt swung open to show her thighs, and was gone. Somewhere a door closed. The man called Sammy stood silently behind the chair.

"All right, Reismann. . . . Or would you like me to call you Mitsumu?" Toler shouted, blinded with rage. "Get on with it you bloody sadistic swine. I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid of you or your moronical playmates. Get on with it or have you lost your nerve! Come on you Eurasian bastard, get on with it!"

Reismann laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh. The eyes peering through the slits in the bandages were gleaming malevolently.

"Don't be melodramatic, Mr. Toler. I want to talk to you. We have so much in common. The Lady of the Almond Trees, for instance. . . ."

"Leave her out of this. Do what you like to me, but leave her out of this, you dirty, filthy, stinking half-breed!"

"Mr. Toler, I fear you are becoming offensive. I see that I must give you a little lesson in good manners that you are not likely to forget."

Reismann raised his hand and nodded.

A thick soft cord was dropped over Toler's head and

forced between his lips. Another nod from Reismann and it was drawn tight so that Toler's head was trapped against the studded post. For a moment he managed to keep his teeth clenched, holding the cord between his lips, pressing back on his teeth. But then, as the pain of the pointed studs grew more intense, he was forced to open his mouth. Momentarily the cord slackened. Then once more the studs bit into the back of his skull. The cord dragged back the corner of his mouth, searing the skin off his lips. He gurgled helplessly. His vision began to blur. Then the cord slackened. Reismann was speaking. As he did so he pressed his fingers together in front of his face.

The cord was taken from his mouth and his head dropped forward.

"Perhaps, Mr. Toler, that will teach you to behave yourself. I must warn you that had I not put a stop to your discomfort, just now, your neck would have been broken. Slowly. Very slowly. That is how the father of Mu Tung Ho almost met his death. He was reluctant to see my point of view. His daughter has proved more amenable."

Toler raised his head. He opened his mouth, but for the moment he could not speak.

Reismann went on: "A moment or so ago you accused me of sadism. I resented that. Your own love of violence has caused me a great deal of discomfort and now prevents you from seeing my face. I made no attempt to molest you, and yet you attacked me. Was that an example of British chivalry? I think, Mr. Toler, it is you who have the streak of sadism, not I."

Toler managed a lopsided smile.

"I didn't intend to hurt you, Reismann. I only wanted to kill you."

"So I gathered."

"Look, Reismann, I don't know what you have in mind for me, but whatever it is will you get on with it. Your voice gets on my nerves."

"That is a pity. I have quite a lot to say to you, and I feel certain that you will not dare to interrupt me. Not now."

"Get on with it then."

"Some years ago I had to prevent you from hindering our

cause. You were an airman of some ability, and I bore you no ill will. But you had to be stopped. I am a sensitive man, Mr. Toler, and I did not enjoy crushing your career."

"Don't make me laugh. Come to the point."

"All in good time. I could have killed you then so easily, but your death would not have helped our cause. I spared your life and hoped I should not encounter you again. But you did not appreciate my generosity. You wanted revenge. The crude, fleshy revenge of the savage semi-human. You are typical of your kind and of your race, cloaking your primitive, selfish desires in a mist of pseudo-civilization."

"That's a big mouthful for a little boy, but where does it get us?"

Reismann rose from his desk and paced across the circular room and back. Then he stopped and looked down at Toler. He wagged an admonishing finger.

"Be careful, Mr. Toler," he said, "do not annoy me."

He sat down on the corner of the desk and went on talking. Toler closed his eyes. His aching brain seemed to be swelling where the studs had bitten into his skull.

"Mr. Toler, you are probably wondering what I am doing in London. I am going to tell you."

"Aren't you afraid I might split on you? That might be embarrassing to you."

"I feel, Mr. Toler, that I need not worry about your being indiscreet. In fact I imagine you are going to be the very soul of discretion."

The words did not register at once on Toler's mind. Slowly he turned his head and looked up at Reismann's bandaged face. Did that mean that he was going to get out of here alive? If it did, what was the price?

"You probably imagined," Reismann went on, "that the New Order died in 1945. You were wrong. Under the surface we have more disciples now than we ever had. All over the world people are turning to the gospel of Adolf Hitler as the only defence against Moscow. I am helping to lay the foundations of the great revival. Some day, before it is too late, the two great nations from which I spring will rise again. That is my mission. This time we will not fail!"

Toler's head was sagging. He gazed down at the pure

white carpet at his feet, struggling to collect his thoughts. Very slowly he said: "Your filthy creed is as dead as a Dodo. We crushed it when we couldn't stand the stink any longer. We'll deal with Moscow when we're good and ready, without the help of scum like you. We'll . . ."

But he was silenced by the cord being rammed back into his mouth. His head was jerked back against the studs. His head spun. His vision blurred in a wave of agony. Reismann sat there on the corner of his desk, rocking grotesquely to and fro. He seemed excited. The bandages covering his face twitched; he seemed to be smiling.

"But we are wasting time, Mr. Toler. You are not interested in politics. You only want me to get down to business. Very well. I am almost glad now that you avoided that accident in Shepperton. It might have been embarrassing; dead bodies are always liable to be embarrassing. I had contemplated performing a further surgical operation on you—it would have left you quite insane—but that will not now be necessary. Your meeting with Mu Tung Ho this morning has given me a much, much better idea. You will not interfere with me again."

At the mention of the name of Mu Tung Ho, Toler became alive again. He stiffened himself with a jerk. The cord tightened in his mouth.

Reismann turned to pick up something from his desk. It was a bundle of long, chalk-white strips, thin and flexible. He gathered them between his hands and flexed them before Toler's eyes.

"You have probably never seen anything like this before, Mr. Toler. It is baleen, or if you prefer it, whalebone, taken from the mouth of the bowhead whale. It is used by the whale to filter its food.

"At about the time when your foolish countrymen were first trying to impose the decadence of their mode of life upon the culture of celestial Japan, your women were using it to distort their bodies in the name of beauty, in order to please their lecherous menfolk.

"But it has other uses. Oh, yes, it has other uses in which it is just as effective, but in a different manner, as when it is used in the corset. Be patient, Mr. Toler, and I will show you. I am going to ensure that you do not annoy me again."

He turned and pressed one of the bell pushes set into the surface of the desk.

* * * *

The Lady of the Almond Trees lowered her powder puff as her dressing-room mirror told her that the door behind her was opening. Cora came in and leaned against the wall with her arms folded beneath her tightly covered bosom. She smiled and moistened her heavily rouged lips.

"Don't worry about your ugly face, Lemon Peel," she said. "I think you're retiring from show business for a few days."

Mu Tung Ho turned slowly on the hard wooden stool. Her face was quite expressionless.

Cora sneered: "You've been a very naughty girl, Lemon Peel, and you know what happens to naughty girls, don't you?"

"What you mean?" Mu Tung Ho's expression did not change.

"Naughty little girls have to be punished, sweetheart. That means you. But first you're going to see your boy friend."

"Boy friend?"

"Yes, sweetheart, it was very naughty of you to do what you did this morning. Mitsumu would have been angry enough if you'd just been satisfied with meeting your boy friend. But you had to be clever. You had to tell him where he could find Mitsumu. That was silly, sweetheart. You shouldn't have done that. Now you're really going to catch it." She paused to light the cigarette she held between her fingers and smiled. "I wonder what he's going to do to you. Maybe he'll let me watch. Or maybe he'll let me do it for him. I've been looking forward to this for a very long time and I'm going to enjoy myself. You had to make a mistake sooner or later. I'd like to see him break your legs or beat your silly yellow face to pulp. But don't worry about that. You're too valuable. It'll be something that doesn't show when you're dressed. Maybe it won't show at all. He once burned a hole through a girl's tongue. That would keep you quiet. But she died so he won't risk that.

But you'll feel it, sweetheart, you'll feel it. You'll scream the roof off, but no one outside'll hear you. The band'll make sure of that. Maybe they'll play 'Chin Chin Chinaman', specially for you." She laughed and blew the ash from her cigarette into Mu Tung Ho's face. The Chinese girl's face was as still and blank as that of an ivory Buddha. Cora went on, still smiling: "Or maybe he'll be more cunning. Maybe he'll make you burn your boy friend's eyes out or something nice like that."

"What you mean, boy friend?"

"Don't give me that, sweetheart. You know who I mean."

"No. I do not know what you mean."

"Oh yes you do. That damn' fool Toler's come calling. But you wouldn't know about that. The damn' fool doesn't know when he's well off."

"Toler?"

"Yes. You catch on quick, don't you? I reckon Mitsumu'll be sending for you any minute now. Why don't you try and run away? The door isn't locked."

She laughed again and threw her cigarette into the bowl of face powder. She hitched up her narrow skirt and sat down on the chair against the wall, crossing her nylon-clad legs. She held her hands out in front of her and inspected her finger-nails.

"Why don't you get wise?" she went on. "You can't fight Mitsumu, Lemon Peel. You either do as you're told, or you get hurt."

She hitched her skirt up higher, above the tops of her stockings.

"That's what I got the only time I got out of line, and it's nothing to what's coming to you."

She pointed to a livid scar where a swastika had been branded into her leg. But still the Chinese girl showed no emotion, no sign of interest, no trace of fear. Cora wanted to see her squirm, wanted to enjoy herself. "Or perhaps you take after your stupid father, if he is your father. Maybe you think that your rotten stinking China's more important than your filthy yellow skin. Maybe you fancy yourself as a heroine."

Mu Tung Ho's eyes flickered, and then blazed into life. She rose slowly, so slowly, to her feet and moved towards

where the white woman was sitting. Cora sprang to her feet and grabbed Mu Tung Ho by the hair and twisted it viciously round her hand.

"Relax, sweetheart," she hissed, "relax."

Mu Tung Ho's face twisted in pain, but remorselessly she raised her hands. Higher. Higher. Then down. Quickly. Like a flash of light. Nails crooked like tiger's claws. She felt the fragments of flesh caught beneath her nails.

Cora shrieked and flung herself away, covering her face with her hands. She crashed into the wall and with a sobbing scream sank down on her knees, smearing the wall with blood. She collapsed, face downwards on the filthy matting, writhing and screaming. Mu Tung Ho looked passionlessly down at her adversary and wiped her bloody fingers against the yellow silk of her gown.

Somewhere a bell rang.

There were footsteps in the passage outside.

6

It was well after one o'clock in the morning when Angela swung the big grey car in through the open gates of the house on the outskirts of Maidenhead. With her hands trembling and numb with cold she rammed her key into the lock and rushed into the house. Her third call located Nielson at his club. His voice was thick with sleep when he answered.

"Hello, Nielson here."

"Squadron Leader Nielson?" Angela asked pointlessly.

"Yes."

"My name is Angela Sansom. Something's happened to Nigel Toler. You must help me."

"Toler! Christ! What's happened?" His voice suddenly cleared. His speech became clipped, alarmed.

"He vanished in a restaurant in Soho."

"Vanished? What the hell do you mean? Who the devil are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. He's in danger. You must help me."

"What do you mean, vanished?" he demanded angrily.

"He just left our table at dinner and went out to try and find something out and he didn't come back. Oh, please, please, you must help me. He's in danger. Don't you understand? He's in danger. You've got to help me. Damn it, you must."

"Look here, young lady, you'd better pull yourself together. I don't know who you are and I'm not at all sure that you ring true. If something has happened to Nigel Toler there's going to be trouble for someone. If you're trying to fool me, then God help you. Now pull yourself together and tell me what happened. First of all, who are you?"

"I'm Angela Sansom. My father is Colonel Ian Sansom."

"I see. Where are you?"

"I'm in Maidenhead."

"Good God, woman! What are you doing there? You said you'd left Toler in Soho!"

"Nigel told me to come home. He said I had to do exactly as he told me."

"But damn it, wench, you're supposed to be a woman not a sheep. Haven't you got any sense of your own? What time did you leave Soho?"

"About a quarter to twelve."

"What!" bellowed Nielson. "You left it for two hours before you phoned me? Are you mad? If you don't pull your finger out pretty damned quick I'm going to lose my temper."

Angela dissolved into tears.

"Oh, please help me. . . . Please!" she sobbed.

"Oh, all right, all right, but for heaven's sake stop that snivelling. Tell me what happened."

Tearfully and confusedly, Angela told Nielson the story of what had happened that night. When she finished he had regained his temper but not his patience.

"I see," he said. "But I can't say that you've been very bright. I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, get some rest."

"Oh, I can't rest until I know he's safe."

"You should have thought of that before. Do as you're told and go to bed. A droopy woman's no use to me or to anyone else."

"But I want to help. Surely there's something I could do?"

"Not to-night anyway. If you'd stayed up here in town you might have been able to help. As it is you'll have to wait till morning. Can you be at New Scotland Yard at ten o'clock?"

"Yes, of course I can. But you must do something before then."

Nielson's voice softened. "I'll do all I can. In the meantime get some sleep."

"All right then," she said contritely. "What do I do when I get to Scotland Yard?"

"Ask for Superintendent Henderson. He's a friend of mine and I think he'll agree to see us. He's the chap who

saw Toler during the war and wouldn't believe him. I'll see you then. I should be there waiting before you turn up."

"Superintendent Henderson?"

"Yes, that's right. And if you get there first, don't be nervous, will you? He's quite a decent sort of chap even if he is hard to convince. Now you get along to bed and don't worry. I'll do everything I possibly can. Good night."

"Good night."

Angela rang off and stood staring helplessly at the mahogany table-top. Then she swung round suddenly. Her mother was standing just inside the door, an expression of disappointment on her face. She drew her dressing-gown more closely about her.

"I thought you were going to be home early," she said. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Oh, Mother . . ." Angela cried, and flung herself face downwards on the settee, burying her head in the cushions.

Mrs. Sansom crossed to her daughter's side and looked down at her. She frowned, not knowing what to think. She was used to her daughter's insolent defiance, but this was different. She sank down on the edge of the settee and put her arm uncertainly round Angela's shoulders.

"What is it, Angela? Tell me."

"I . . . I . . . It's . . . It's horrible. . . . It's Nigel. . . . He's been. . . . He's gone. . . . They've got him. . . . They're going to kill him. . . ."

"Now, darling, I'm sure it can't be as bad as that. Tell me all about it. Who do you mean by 'They'. Tell me. . . ."

"I can't. . . . Not now. . . . Oh, it . . . it's too awful. . . . I . . . I . . . Oh, I love him so. . . ."

Mrs. Sansom sighed.

"All right then, darling. Tell me all about it in the morning. It won't seem half so terrible then, whatever it is. Come along to bed, and I'll get you some warm milk."

It had never occurred to Mrs. Sansom that drama could obtrude itself into her life; she could not recognize it when it did.

* * * *

Detective-Inspector Cox sat in his office waiting for his superior to arrive. It was one of those rare moments in his life when he could do nothing of value without first consulting the Superintendent, or waiting for instructions. He was a heavy, placid, cheerful man of robust middle age who had never succeeded in mastering the priceless art of appearing busy when in fact he was idle. It was almost nine o'clock on a dank and uninviting morning; Henderson could be expected at any moment. Cox, looking from every angle the epitome of idleness, tipped back his chair and leaned against the wall.

"Hey, Tilbury," he said. "I'll bet you half a dollar it's the green one to-day."

Sergeant Tilbury raised his head. He was thin, small boned, pallid and quite bald. His greatest asset was that he had never quite managed to look like a policeman.

"Sure thing," he answered in a tone which confirmed the obvious fact that he was psychologically incapable of treating his superiors with proper respect. "You'll never learn, will you? Look here, it's Saturday and he's due to see the Commissioner at eleven o'clock. It's bound to be the white one with the little black spots."

They were talking about Henderson, a man who for thirty years had been irritated by the conventional demands his profession made upon him. But in one small way he doggedly defied formality. Yet it was possible, just possible, to be with him for days without noticing his quirk and thereby realizing the object of Cox's gambling.

At exactly nine o'clock, Superintendent Henderson came in; he had obviously been in the building some time, long enough, at any rate, to deposit his hat and coat in his own office.

"Morning, men," he said cheerfully, "Squadron Leader Nielson will be here at ten o'clock. I'm just on my way down to the library—think I left my pipe down there—so give me ten minutes and then come on along to my office and we'll have a chat about last night."

He puffed out his lean cheeks in an exaggerated gesture.

"My, but it's hot in here," he said. "Why must you chaps make the place like an orchid house? Can't you open a few windows?"

Then he unbuttoned his immaculate double-breasted jacket. Cox and Tilbury waited anxiously. As the jacket swung open, Cox smiled and Tilbury reluctantly drove his hand into his trousers pocket in search of half a crown.

From the lower left-hand pocket of the Superintendent's waistcoat, there protruded a richly patterned green silk handkerchief.

Henderson smiled.

"Sorry to let you down, Tilbury," he said, "but I hope that will teach you to stop gambling."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir," Tilbury said, growing pink around the ears.

Cox raised an eyebrow. Two 'sirs' from Tilbury in as many seconds was an event worth recording.

Henderson gave a short laugh and strode out of the room.

"Huh," muttered Cox, as the door clicked shut. "Why the hell must the Super be so bright every morning? He was up half the night, same as me, and look at him."

Sergeant Tilbury made a grimace.

"Women. That's what it is," he said. "Women. You had to get married. Hanky and me, we had sense. We steer clear of them. . . . Except when they murder someone or something."

"Aw, put a sock in it," Cox returned venomously. "That'll be the day when any woman takes a second look at you. . . . Except out of morbid curiosity," he added as an afterthought.

* * * *

It was some minutes before ten o'clock when Angela self-consciously entered the precincts of New Scotland Yard. Tilbury was waiting for her to escort her to Henderson's office. As she entered the office, the Superintendent rose from his chair and walked round his desk to greet her.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully. "You are Miss Sansom?"

"Yes, that's right." She felt nervous.

"Splendid. Splendid. Would you take a seat. . . . I don't expect Nielson will keep us waiting long. You haven't met him, have you?"

"No. I've just spoken to him on the phone, that's all."

"Then how was it you came to get in touch with him last night?"

The question startled her.

"Those were Mr. Toler's instructions. He told me to go straight home and then keep on the phone until I got hold of Squadron Leader Nielson."

"Yes. Of course." He paused. "While we're waiting would you care to tell me what happened last night, in your own words? I've heard Nielson's version, but of course you will be able to give me so much more in the way of detail. And of course I must be quite sure about the details before we go any further. You do understand, Miss Sansom?"

"Yes, of course. Where shall I begin?"

"Well just one moment please, I'd like to have what you say taken down . . . if you have no objection."

"Of course," she smiled nervously.

Henderson pressed a button on his desk. A moment later Tilbury came in carrying a notebook and sat down at a discreet distance.

"Right ho, Tilbury," said Henderson. Then turning to Angela: "Will you carry on, Miss Sansom. Give me absolutely all the details you can remember."

Before she had reached the end of her account she was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in," Henderson called. "Excuse me, Miss Sansom."

The door opened to admit a burly man in R.A.F. uniform. He was followed by Cox.

Henderson rose from his chair and stretched out his hand.

"Good morning, Nielson," he said. "You haven't met Miss Sansom, have you?"

Nielson turned to Angela and bowed slightly. He took her hand and squeezed it gently. He was solid and reassuring.

"Sorry if I was rude to you last night," he apologized, "but I was sleepy and damned worried."

"Oh, that's all right," Angela replied, "have you heard anything?"

"I wish I had." He turned to face Henderson. "Sorry I'm late. Hope I haven't held you up."

"That's all right, Nielson. I'm just getting a statement from Miss Sansom. Could you hang on a minute, we've nearly finished?"

Nielson sat down in the only other vacant chair and balanced his cap on the point of one knee. Cox stood by the window, placidly gazing down into the street below.

"Right ho, now, Tilbury," said Henderson. Then to Angela: "Do carry on, Miss Sansom."

When she had finished, Henderson turned to the Squadron Leader. "I don't suppose you have anything to add to what you've told me already?"

Nielson shook his head. Henderson turned to Tilbury. "That's the lot," he said. "Get it typed out and let me have two copies as soon as you can."

When the door closed behind Tilbury, Henderson looked across at Angela, smiled lopsidedly, and laid the palms of his hands flat upon his blotter. The green silk handkerchief peeped coyly from beneath his jacket. Before Angela could speak he answered her question.

"No, Miss Sansom," he said, "we haven't found very much out, I'm afraid. All I can say is, we're doing our best. Frankly we're not sure where we can start."

"But haven't you been to that restaurant?" Angela cried. "He must be there somewhere."

Cox turned away from the window and raised his shaggy eyebrows.

"Cor," he said.

Henderson raised his head.

"Miss Sansom," he said reprovingly, "you've been very patient up to now; if you'll wait a moment I'll tell you what we've done so far."

Angela lowered her head and bit her lip. Nielson leaned over and squeezed her shoulder. She smiled at him gratefully.

"Go on, Henderson," he said softly.

"Last night Squadron Leader Nielson got me out of bed at two o'clock to tell me what you had told him. Cox, Tilbury and I went down to 'The Dragons of Kunming' and took a look around. We saw the manager—he's an old

Chinese who must be seventy if he's a day. He showed us everything there was to see, and I can assure you that there was nothing in the least suspicious to be found. I don't say that the place is all it should be. I have a feeling the place is staying open a little later than it should, but apart from that everything seemed to be quite above board. Anyway there was no sign of Toler. We checked his home and he certainly isn't there. Where in God's name he's got to I can't imagine, but we shall find him. You need have no doubts on that score."

Angela raised her head slowly and gripped the arms of her chair. Her pale cheeks flushed. Her lips trembled.

"What are you going to do? What are you going to do?" she cried shrilly. "Why don't you . . ."

"Now, Miss Sansom! Please!" Henderson bellowed. He rose sharply to his feet and leaned on the edge of his desk. Cox looked startled. Nielson shifted in his seat with embarrassment.

But Angela was not to be quelled.

"If you'd only listened to him, he'd be safe now," she blurted. "You wouldn't believe that Reismann existed. You thought Nigel was mad. Why didn't you listen to him? Why?"

Henderson's expression ceased to be sympathetic. His eyebrows bunched together low over his eyes. He raised his hand and slapped it down on the desk top.

"Be quiet, Madam!" he snapped. "Pull yourself together, or be good enough to leave."

Angela closed her mouth slowly and gazed at him in amazement. A single tear trickled down the side of her nose.

"I say, Henderson," Nielson murmured.

"Sorry—can't stand hysterics."

Still frowning the Superintendent left his desk and, for a few moments, paced to and fro across the room. As he came up to Cox for the third time he said: "Cox, go and see what Tilbury is doing with Miss Sansom's statement. He's had time to get it up as an illuminated address."

"Very good, sir."

The stout detective was obviously pleased to leave his superior's company. As the door closed behind him Hen-

derson returned to his chair and sat down. He adjusted the green silk handkerchief and coughed slightly. Then he turned to Angela.

"Miss Sansom," he said. "I am a policeman, not a crystal gazer; you must remember that. I have investigated everything Mr. Toler has ever told me with the greatest of care, but without discovering a single thing. Despite Mr. Toler's disappearance, I still have the gravest doubts about his reports of this mysterious Dr. Reismann."

"But you don't understand," Angela interrupted. "He's threatened Nigel's life. . . . He must be real."

"Be reasonable, Miss Sansom," Henderson replied. "There is absolutely no proof that any threats have been made against Mr. Toler. The message you told me about was typed on Toler's paper on Toler's machine. It doesn't mean a thing by itself."

"But we were nearly run down in Shepperton the following night."

"People are nearly run down all over the country every minute. No. That doesn't get us anywhere."

"Look here, Henderson," Nielson put in. "I can vouch for Reismann's existence, and I'm ready to swear that he's on the wrong side of the law."

"I know all about that," Henderson retorted, "but there is still no evidence that the man is in this country."

"That's so," Nielson said thoughtfully, "but I'm not prepared to agree with you if you suggest that Toler is suffering from hallucinations. In any case he's missing and it's up to you to find him."

Angela was rolling her handkerchief nervously between the palms of her hands.

"Do something. You must do something," she murmured in a small anxious voice. "There must be something you can do."

Henderson looked at her and scratched the side of his elegant nose.

"We're doing all we can, Miss Sansom," he said. "Every policeman in London is looking out for him, and we're still keeping an eye on 'The Dragons of Kunming'. Personally, I expect he will turn up without our help before very long."

"What exactly do you mean by that?" Nielson said truculently.

Henderson turned slowly in his chair. He said: "I'll speak frankly. You know, Nielson, that Toler has interested me for a long time; ever since he first came to me with his story about Reismann in 1940. And we've discussed the whole matter dozens of times since."

"And you know my views," returned Nielson. "I believe every word he said."

"I know," said Henderson. "But let's be logical. We agree that Toler is naturally highly strung. You know as well as I do why he was released from the Air Force. And we both know, although you won't agree that this actually happened, that his mind could have been affected by that operation he had in Hong Kong. You believe that that operation was carried out to keep Toler on the ground without raising suspicions, but that point can't be proved one way or the other. But because of that belief Toler bears Reismann a grudge which is easily understandable. However, we mustn't let Toler's personal feelings cloud our judgment."

Henderson opened a file which lay on the desk in front of him and then went on: "I have here the original statement made by Toler in 1940. He begins by describing what happened in Hong Kong and says that he only saw Reismann for a few seconds, in the sick bay at Kai Tak, when he first recovered consciousness. A little later he goes on to say:

"... After that I didn't see Reismann until a couple of nights ago, Monday night that was of course. I was in an air-raid shelter down in the City. You know what it was like. Jerry was giving us all he had and it was a bit grim. A small bomb fell on the next shelter to ours, killing thirty or forty people. The woman next to me fainted and a little cripple boy opposite went into hysterics. It was hellish. Those people were wonderful, but they weren't very far from panic. My head was aching abominably and I was afraid I was going to black out again. I had visions of being trampled to death and I wished to God I was out in the open. Then an Air Raid Warden

came in and tried to calm everyone down. He was a splendid fellow. God alone knows what the next shelter must have been like but he could still raise a smile and a joke. He'd just about laughed the fear out of us when I saw another man come in behind him. I think it was Reismann.

"I jumped to my feet and made a dive at him. I'll never forgive myself for doing that. It started the rot. They all panicked. I found out this morning that the little cripple boy was killed in the crush.

"I got out first, but Reismann was gone. The warden tried to hold on to me, but the crush from the shelter broke his grip and then a shell fragment, or something, hit him in the neck. He went down like a pole-axed bull. I felt as though I had killed him myself.

"After that all I could think of was of catching up with Reismann. I raced along London Wall, hoping to God I was still on his trail. At the corner of Moorgate I was blown down by blast. Dozens of buildings were burning all around me. The whole sky was alive with flares and flak. Bombs were coming down all the time. Twice I tripped over fire hoses. I was nearly run down by an ambulance. Then as I got to Bishopsgate two policemen caught me. I spent the rest of the night in a police cell. A doctor came in and gave me a sedative to calm me down and I didn't come round until the raid was over. The police wrote me off as hysterical and let me go."

Henderson laid down the papers and sighed.

"There you have it," he said. "I suppose I should have read it to you before, but I thought it best not to. And remember, Nielson, you were in this office when Toler wrote that statement, he wouldn't dictate it. He seemed normal enough at the time though."

Nielson was frowning.

"Of course he was normal. He always has been," he said.

"I hope you're right, Nielson. But just let us consider this statement carefully. You brought Toler along here because you felt that what had happened was of great importance. Of course you were quite right to do so. I asked

Toler for a simple account of what happened and he presented me with a highly coloured picture of an air raid when all that really happened that was pertinent could have been told in a couple of dozen words. Then we have to consider the next statement he made, about a month later. He said:

" . . . About ten days ago I had a phone call from Reismann. He told me that if I didn't stop trying to incriminate him, further surgical treatment would become necessary, and I would spend the rest of my days in a lunatic asylum. He didn't want to kill me because my body would be an embarrassment to him. . . ."

"Where's this getting us?" said Nielson impatiently.

"Nielson, I want you to know that I respect your views and I only wish that I could accept them. But I submit, and believe me I've had plenty of experience in this sort of thing, that those statements are typical of what I would expect from a mentally unbalanced person. In the second statement Toler claims to have been threatened and says that he delayed reporting the matter because he was afraid. Yet nothing happened to him. Nothing happened in a decade. Then yesterday, when he was arrested. . . ."

"Arrested!" Angela exclaimed.

"It was a mistake, Miss Sansom. Mr. Toler was caught chasing a Chinese woman in Soho and the constable thought he was up to no good. He explained at the station that he thought it was the girl who was mixed up in this business in Hong Kong. He told the Inspector the story of what happened in Hong Kong, just as he told me in 1940, but with one important difference. He as good as said that he had never laid eyes on Reismann! And I would suggest that even if he had seen him for a few seconds when coming out of the anaesthetic after a serious operation he would not recognize him, years later, in a dimly lit air-raid shelter. You were there, Nielson, when Reismann visited Toler in the sick bay at Kai Tak before he disappeared. Was Toler fully conscious?"

"Yes. I believe he was."

"Of course. But I still think that he is imagining things.

And I think you would agree with me if you were not his friend."

"But I was attacked," said Angela. "That wasn't imagination."

Henderson looked at her and smiled gently.

"That doesn't mean a thing," he said. "We wish that sort of thing didn't happen in Soho, but it does. You are a very beautiful young woman, if I may say so, and that is a very dangerous thing to be if you are alone in Soho after dark."

"But the lights were turned off," she protested.

"Yes, I know. Nielson told me that and I had a look at them. The bulbs are in Edison screw lamp holders. Anyone could darken that alley in ten seconds by giving the bulbs a twist."

Nielson swallowed hard and rose to his feet.

"I don't think there's any point in staying here any longer," he said. "We're wasting our time." He turned to Angela who was still wringing her handkerchief between her fingers. "Shall we go, Miss Sansom?"

Henderson stood up.

"Before you go," he said, "there is one other thing I have to tell you."

"Well," said Nielson coldly.

"Last night, when I went down to 'The Dragons of Kunning', I had a word with the Chinese dancing girl. The manager assured me that she was the only Chinese woman that had ever worked there. She'd pass at a distance, with heavy make-up on, but close to she's as ugly as sin, and she obviously had smallpox as a very small child. She had never heard of Toler. If I remember rightly, Toler described his Mu Tung Ho as the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. That doesn't tie in either."

Nielson helped Angela to her feet and they turned to go. Angela looked back at Henderson with a helpless look on her face.

"Don't worry, Miss Sansom," he said sympathetically, "we're doing everything we can. We'll let you know as soon as we find him. And, believe me, as soon as we get any concrete evidence on Dr. Reismann, we'll act upon it. You can be sure of that."

"Thank you," she murmured, "good-bye."

She walked slowly across the room. Her shoulders were hunched; the rich chestnut hair flowing down over her shoulders seemed strangely lifeless. Nielson followed her.

As they reached the door Nielson turned round.

"I think you're in for a big surprise, Henderson," he said.

The Superintendent raised his eyebrows. "I think not," he said, "but we shall see."

7

THEY walked up Whitehall together, Angela and Nielson, in the direction of Trafalgar Square. They walked slowly; neither of them spoke. London was drab and dull and tired. For a moment a thin shaft of sunlight broke through the low grey clouds, and then was gone again. Angela did not notice it. She walked stolidly on, gazing at the wet dirty pavement before her. As they reached the Admiralty, Nielson turned to her.

"Coffee?" he asked.

Angela nodded and leaned against a lamp-post whilst he hailed a passing taxi. The cab swung round in a narrow arc, and drew in to the kerb.

"Where to?" the man asked.

"'The Mitre', Jermyn Street," Nielson replied.

As she climbed into the cab, Angela remembered in a far-away manner that it was at 'The Mitre' that Peter Vesey liked to have his coffee. It seemed so long since that stupid little scene in the Savoy on Wednesday evening that had really been the start of all this. And yet it was only Saturday now. But she didn't want to see Peter Vesey again. Then she remembered that he was due to go to New York on Sunday. He was a representative for a firm of electrical engineers of which his father was chairman; Angela was sure that it was one of those instances where blood counted more than ability. Surely he would not have time for leisurely morning coffee the day before going abroad. But she failed to convince herself. She felt certain he would be there. He would be sitting by the wide Tudor hearth with some stupid, high-heeled, wide-eyed chit, shooting one hell of a line. She turned to Nielson and parted her lips to speak. She looked at his face, drawn and pale, and changed her mind.

"If only I could do something," he said. "The devil of it is, Henderson may be right."

Angela stiffened.

"You don't really think so, do you?" she whispered. "If Henderson is right, then Nigel just walked out on me last night, and he wouldn't do a thing like that. I'm sure he wouldn't."

"No, he wouldn't. I've met Reismann and I've talked to him. He's as damnably clever as they come. He's like a smooth slimy snake. Somewhere he's got Nigel, poor devil, and unless we find him double quick it'll be too late."

Angela gripped his arm with both hands. "What are we going to do?" she asked. "You must know. Nigel was sure you could help."

"First of all we've got to think. Henderson can't do anything yet awhile, so what happens next is probably up to us. Anyway, I think a cup of coffee would do us both good."

Angela made no comment. Her tired mind was seething with disjointed thoughts and memories. The taxi turned into Jermyn Street and pulled up outside a wide doorway surmounted by a gilded mitre.

"Do we have to go here?" Angela asked.

"Why?" Nielson looked surprised. "Don't you like it?"

"No, it's not that. The place just has associations, that's all."

"Oh, I'm sorry about that." He paused. "Would you mind terribly though? You see I'm expecting a phone call, and I said I'd come here after I left Scotland Yard."

She tried to smile.

"No, it's all right. I don't really mind," she said.

As they entered the big oak-panelled room she looked quickly round the tables. The thought of Peter Vesey was still troubling her. He was not there. She felt better for that.

The waiter led them across to a table, set close to the wide hearth, where a log fire burned cheerfully. They sat down and waited for their coffee to be brought. Nielson gave her a cigarette and took one for himself from an ancient silver case. When he had lit them both he asked: "How long have you known Nigel Toler?"

"About three days. I met him on Wednesday evening."

Nielson raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Then how is it that you are so concerned about his well-being?"

Before she could answer the coffee was set down before them. She gazed down into the black steaming depths of her cup and ran her finger round the edge of her saucer.

"I love him," she said. "I don't suppose you can understand that, but it's true. I'd die for him. I really would." She raised her head and looked accusingly into Nielson's eyes. "You don't believe me do you? And you don't trust me either."

"Of course I do. I've just got to make quite sure of things, that's all. You see, Toler loved a Chinese girl and he thought that she loved him. Then she gave him a doped cigarette that started all this rotten business. I wouldn't like to think that you would behave like that. See what I mean?"

"Are you accusing me?" she flared. "If it hadn't been for me, you'd never have heard that Nigel was missing."

Her green eyes were shining brightly. She was about to lose her temper. Nielson's answer however quietened her somewhat.

"Don't misunderstand me, Miss Sansom," he said. "I spoke to your father before I met you this morning, and his description of you was quite satisfactory."

"My father?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"But he's in Berlin."

"No, Miss Sansom, he's here in London."

"But he can't be."

"Why not?"

"He's not due home on leave until next week, and he'd never stay in London without letting us know."

Nielson smiled.

"I don't know why he's in London. Some sort of conference, so far as I could gather. But he didn't get here until midnight, so he thought he'd surprise you by dropping in on you this morning."

Angela gulped.

"But how do you know my father?" she asked.

"I don't," he answered. "Henderson checked up on you pretty thoroughly before he met you. It was easy to find your home and the names of your parents. Then he checked up with the War Office who put him in touch with your father. Henderson contacted him about six o'clock this morning and I rang him just before I got to Scotland Yard. That's why I was late."

"Oh. I see. Tell me about this doped cigarette."

Nielson told her, as briefly as he could, what had happened in Hong Kong. It left her feeling sick. Then he said: "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"No. I don't think so."

"How did you come to meet Nigel?"

When she had finished her story Nielson shook his head slowly.

"I'd no idea things had got as bad as that. I've not heard from him since he said he was moving to Laleham a couple of weeks ago."

"No, I know. Nigel tried dozens of times to get in touch with you but couldn't find you."

"No. I don't suppose he could. I'm having a bit of trouble with my solicitor over the mortgage on my house. I didn't know how long it would take me so I didn't fix anything up for last night. I was lucky to get a room at my club on spec. I'm expecting a call from my solicitor now, actually."

A few minutes later the waiter came up to their table.

"Squadron Leader Nielson?"

"Yes?"

"You're wanted on the phone, sir."

"Blast. All right. Thank you."

"This way, sir."

"Excuse me, Miss Sansom. I won't be a minute."

Two minutes later he returned.

"I'll have to go, I'm afraid."

"But what are we going to do. I feel so helpless."

He thought for a moment.

"The obvious place to start is 'The Dragons of Kunming', but we mustn't rush into this bald headed. That won't do anyone any good. I'll have to think about it,

and give you a ring as soon as I can. But at the moment, you've got to go home and get some sleep. You look all in."

"Oh, I couldn't sleep now. I must do something."

"You've got to get some rest, young lady, or you're going to be ill."

"All right," she said. "I'll try."

"Good girl. Anyway you'll feel better when you've seen your father."

* * * *

When Angela arrived home her father came out of the library to greet her. She rushed into his arms.

"Oh, Daddy," she cried, "this is wonderful. Why didn't you tell us you were coming?"

She looked up into his face. The green eyes which she had inherited from him were tired and pale. His hair was greying rapidly. She realized suddenly, for the first time it seemed, how tall he was, and how thin.

"What's the matter, little girl?" he asked. "What's all this business with the police? Are you in trouble?"

"No, Daddy. It's all right. A friend of mine has disappeared, and the police are trying to find him, that's all. I'll tell you about it after lunch." She held herself away from him and looked at him carefully. Then she cried: "Darling! You've been promoted. A full-blown brigadier. Oh, Daddy, how thrilling!"

But his brow furrowed.

"You look upset. Are you sure you wouldn't like to tell me all about it now?"

"No, it's nothing. Really it isn't. Nothing for you to worry about anyway."

He smiled.

"In that case," he said, "I expect the young man in the library will be able to do all that's necessary."

"Young man?" She bit her lip. Then she tore herself from her father and ran, smiling, into the library.

"Nigel! Nigel!" she cried. "Oh. . . ."

As she entered the book-lined room she stopped suddenly, leaning on a chair for support.

"What do you want?" she asked coldly.

Standing with his back to the fire was Peter Vesey.

"Oh, I say, Angy," he said petulantly. "I want to see you of course."

"I told you I'd finished with you. Would you mind going now."

"Oh, really old girl. I said I was sorry."

"I don't care what you said. I don't want to see you. Will you go, please."

He twisted his large red moustache and straightened his tie.

"Look here, Angy, have a heart. Can't we bury the jolly old hatchet? Won't you have dinner with me to-night?"

"I thought you were going to New York."

"The Old Man decided he ought to go instead. Now I've got to stay here and behave like ye compleat business man."

"Too bad. At least you'd be out of the way in New York."

"Come on, Angy. Let's go and paint the town a tasteful shade of pink."

"No. Go away and leave me alone."

"Oh, please."

"No! Get out! "

"Right ho, Angy. If that's the way you feel about it I'll go."

He picked up his hat and gloves from the desk and walked past her towards the door.

It was then that an idea forced itself into her mind. Why should she wait for Nielson? She could do all that could be done without his help.

"Peter," she said softly.

"Yes, old girl?" He turned his head and looked at her in astonishment.

"Peter, if I go to dinner with you to-night, do you promise to keep sober?"

"Yes of course I do. Oh, I say."

"You mean that?"

"Angy, of course I do."

"And can we go anywhere I say?"

"Of course we can. I say, Angy, this is wizard. Why d'you hold out on me like that?"

"You remember that place in Soho called 'The Dragons of Kunming'?"

"Ra-ther—absolutely bang on, old girl. But I thought it didn't appeal to you. That's why I only took you that once. Of course we left before the fun began."

"Have you still got a car?" She knew she would be all in by midnight and she dreaded the thought of falling to sleep at the wheel; but she would never consider letting Peter Vesey drive her Bentley.

"Ra-ther," he replied. "The old Thunder Bug's round the corner right now, all ready and waiting."

"Good. Then call for me at eight."

"Roger dodger. Wo-hoa!"

He kissed her boisterously and clamped his hat on his head.

"Wo-hoa!" he hooted as he made his way to the front door.

But once outside the house he scratched his chin and looked back towards the library windows. Why eight o'clock? They wouldn't be in town till way after nine. And why go to a place she didn't like?

It was all quite beyond him.

* * * *

She couldn't help seeing it lying there among his clothes. He had told her that he had brought her some nylons back from the Continent, while they were at lunch, and had said that she could go and get them from his bag. She hadn't been snooping; she just found it lying there. But she shouldn't have read it; she knew she shouldn't. It was marked 'Secret'. He should have put it in the safe. She was ashamed of herself.

When she came downstairs her mother was standing in the hall.

"You have been a long time, Angela, dear."

"I've been powdering my nose." It sounded thin.

"Well don't make a noise, darling, your father's asleep in his chair. He's tired out, poor man."

"Mummy, you didn't tell him about last night, did you? It would only worry him. When he asked me what was going on, I think I managed to put him off all right."

"I think he ought to know, dear."

"Not yet, Mummy, please. I've got to go out after dinner to-night to see if anything's happened, and I'd rather Daddy thought I was out enjoying myself."

"Oh, don't go out to-night, darling. Can't you just ring up?"

"No, I must see Squadron Leader Nielson." She lied for no reason. So many of her excursions had needed a cloak of lies that the process was now almost automatic. "I'd like to stay in, but I promised I'd go. I'll be back by eleven, and I won't go out again while Daddy's home. I promise."

"Very well, dear. But I do wish you'd let me tell your father."

"I'll tell him in the morning. That do?"

"Oh, very well."

Angela squeezed her mother's hand and together they went into the drawing-room. The brigadier lay in his chair by the fire with his head sagged on his chest, sleeping peacefully. Mrs. Sansom sat down in her chair at the other side of the hearth. Angela curled up at her feet on the rug. She rubbed her head against her mother's knee.

"Isn't it wonderful to have him back?" she said. But her mind was swinging between 'The Dragons of Kunming', and that document, in her father's bag, marked 'Secret'. And her heart was with Nigel Toler, wherever he was. Deep in the fire she could see that strange circular doorway and the rich orange curtains; a dark narrow passage and a man squirming on the ground at her feet. Instinctively she drew closer to her mother. Neither of the women spoke. Angela gazed fixedly into the fire, slowly absorbing the sense of peace and calm which had settled on her home. And then, somehow, she no longer feared the coming night.

* * * *

At nine-thirty that evening Angela was back in the

circular maw of 'The Dragons of Kunming'. She had told Peter Vesey nothing of what had happened there the night before. So far as he was concerned it was merely her transient whim which had brought them there. She wanted to see if there were more than one Chinese dancer. It just didn't make sense. He sat opposite her and toyed with the noodles on his plate. Angela watched him silently; she could not even pretend to eat.

As she sat there she became increasingly aware of the pointless stupidity of her plan. What did it matter if Mu Tung Ho had a stand-in? Would that really cut any ice with Henderson? Perhaps she was doing this because, that morning, Nielson had had no plan to offer. She disliked the gentle way he had ordered her about and called her 'young woman'. Young woman or not, she could show herself as canny as any man. She at least was not prepared to sit around and wait for something to happen. To hell with the Nielsons and Hendersons. She wanted action even if she had to start it herself.

She fingered the broad emerald choker, close about her throat, and smoothed the high-piled coppery curls of her elaborate coiffure. Her dress of the subtlest golden hue set fire to her chic. Sophistication was disguise enough. She bore no kinship with the demure, lace-collared redhead of the night before. And even so, she was safe with a man at her side, even Peter. But her thoughts rang a false chord, and she knew it. No one knew where she was. If things went wrong no one would ever know, until she came back. If she came back. Yet she lacked the courage to call herself a fool and go home.

Peter Vesey spoke.

"I say, old girl," he said, "I wish you'd tell me what all this is about. I've got myself a nasty feeling that something's up. Whatever it is I'd like to know. If I'm sticking my neck out I do at least like to know who's going to kick it. Won't you tell me?"

"No, Peter, it wouldn't help. Just tell me if it's the girl you've seen before and then we'll get out of here as quick as we can."

"Okey-dokey," he said resignedly, "but I wish it was the other turn you were interested in though."

"What other turn?"

"Wo-hoa!" His eyes twinkled. "It's bang on."

"Stop burbling and tell me about it."

"Well I don't know whether it's really in your line—and I'm sure I don't know what my dear old cub mistress would have thought but . . ."

"Peter!" she hissed, "for God's sake stop trying to be funny and get to the point." She was gripping the edge of the table with both hands. The muscles of her neck were drawn up tight.

"Sorry old girl," he murmured, crestfallen, "only wanted to perk you up."

"I know, I know. Get on with it. What about the other turn?"

"Well." He grinned and toyed with the prongs of a fork. "It comes on at about midnight—girls and all that sort of thing. Boy, oh, boy, what gorgeous slabs of cheese-cake. Must be a dozen of them, and the better the congregation the less they wear." He grinned. "The last time I came here it was just rose buds and blushes."

"Don't be so confoundedly lecherous. And anyway I thought you said that I was all the woman you'd ever want."

"Sorry, old girl, but I'm only human."

"Oh, is that all?" she returned testily.

"Oh, I say."

She took a deep breath and bit her lip.

"I'm sorry, Peter. Didn't mean to be beastly. You've been awfully sweet about this. I suppose I must be getting jittery."

"That's all right, Angy. Wish you'd tell me what this is all about though. Won't you, Angy? Please?"

"No, Peter. I'd rather you didn't know. Is there anything else about this cabaret that's worth knowing?"

"Ra-ther. When they've finished their song and dance they come out among the tables and start giving the boys ideas."

"That all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"Does the Chinese girl come out again?"

"No. She only does the one dance."

Peter looked around him. He was bored; Angela wouldn't dance, and in any case he didn't think the band was up to much.

"I say, doesn't that chap over there look like Hitler?"

"I don't see the resemblance," said Angela, after she had searched the opposite side of the room with her eyes. "And anyway I don't think he'd be here, do you?"

Peter laughed loudly.

"That's more like my Angy," he said. Then more seriously: "I wonder if he really is dead?"

"Of course he is. But the Nazis aren't."

"Don't be silly, they're dead as dodos."

"They aren't. Daddy is on the Control Commission in Berlin, and he should know."

"He's pulling your leg, old girl."

"Look, Peter," she said. "I read a secret report on underground Nazi activity in Germany. I found it in Daddy's bag. . . ."

The waiter bent between them, and took away the last of the dirty crockery. She didn't like the way he smiled at her, showing his gold-crowned teeth.

Then she went on: "Of course Daddy would be furious if he knew I'd read it, and of course I can't tell you what it said. But believe me there are still far too many Nazis in Germany."

Peter grinned.

"My, you are a naughty girl! I should think Papa would be furious. You ought to be spanked."

Angela's eyes flared.

"That isn't funny! I thought I made that quite clear in the Savoy the other night. If you say that again I'll do more than slap your face. I'll scratch your eyes out!"

Peter flushed.

"Sorry, old girl," he said.

There was an awkward silence. Then Angela pulled herself together and said: "I know you're only trying to be funny. But you ought to know by now."

"That's all right, Angy. My fault."

A few moments later the orchestra stopped playing and the lights grew dim. Angela leaned towards him.

"Now remember, Peter, as soon as we've seen her face we get out of here as quickly as we can."

"Roger dodger, Mata Hari," he whispered in block capitals. "Now I know what Sherlock Holmes felt like."

Her mind swam back to the last man who had called her Mata Hari, and was glad that the lights were low.

The darkness threw the final veil over the world outside. Her spirit was alone in a never-never-land of fear. She wished she had confided in her father. She reached out and sought Peter's hand with her finger-tips.

"It's O.K., Angy. Don't get excited. You're quite safe with me."

But he did not comfort her. His hands were narrow and pale; she longed for the warm, broad hands of Nigel Toler. Yet she clutched Peter's hands as tightly as she could; she clutched them as her only links with life.

Way across the room a girl giggled. Angela winced. Then the gong sounded, softly. Slowly the lights came on. Breathlessly she waited for the dancer in the yellow silk to rise. Then she looked at Peter. He raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

"Come along, Peter, quick as you can."

When they reached the curving staircase Angela hurried on and reached the circular hallway a few steps ahead of him. It was deserted, but the fluttering curtain showed where the doorway was. She clutched at his sleeve and together they crept through the cylindrical porch. She felt safer in the open air, but she tugged at Peter's sleeve.

"Come on, Peter," she said hoarsely, "let's get out into the street."

They turned and groped their way towards the dimly lit alley; the lights were out again. Angela caught her breath; her legs felt weak. From the street beyond the buildings she heard the sound of a car. It was a comforting sound. Clean and homely.

Angela shrieked. A blacker darkness enveloped her as something soft and heavy was drawn across her face. She tried to scream again. Somewhere in the darkness she heard Peter's voice.

"Come on, Angy! Run! Angy! Where are you?"

Footsteps running.

A muffled shot in the muffled darkness.

Footsteps faltering, slithering.

And then there was silence except for the cars in the street outside.

JONATHAN HAWTHORNTHWAITE coaxed the ancient Ford protestingly up the ice-covered road. Thin wisps of snow sprayed in through the cracked celluloid side screens and stung the skin of his brown, wrinkled cheek. He pulled the old sack closer about his ears and leaned forward to rub the frost from his windscreen with the back of his hand. He screwed up his eyes and peered out into the snow-flecked night. The dim headlights showed nothing but the contorted snow waves beating down towards him, and the thin plume of steam from the frozen radiator. When the old car finally groaned to the crest of the hill he pressed his foot on the brake and slid softly to a stop. He slapped his bemittened hands together and then, cupping them in front of his mouth, blew into them noisily.

He was wishing he was back home in his own snug little farm house, but his hands were numb, and he had no intention of starting again until he had coaxed the blood back to his frozen finger-tips. Again he leaned forward and rubbed the windscreen with the sleeve of his coat. He was worried about his sheep. It was nearly the end of February, and the snow should have gone by then. A moment later his sheep were forgotten. He stopped rubbing the windscreen and peered out through the clear patch he had made. His brow furrowed even more deeply than usual. Something was moving over by the snow-caked telegraph pole on the opposite side of the road. He looked out again and gave the windscreen another rub. The thing took shape. It was a man. A man covered from head to foot in snow. Jonathan's mental processes were not rapid, but it did not take him long to decide that the stranger needed help. He thrust his right hand through the gap in the side screens, opened the door, and stepped cautiously down into the road. As the stranger lurched drunkenly towards him he caught him by the shoulders.

"Ee, lad," he cried, "are't daft? Tha'll catch tha death."

Jonathan didn't know what to make of it. People didn't go wandering about on the moors on a night like this.

The stranger clutched the side of the car for support and raised his head.

"Take me to London," he gasped. "I'll pay you anything you like as soon as we get there, but I must get there to-night."

"Now a knows tha's daft. Get into't car, lad. Tha's comin' 'ome wi' me."

"But I must get back to London."

"Don't be daft. Tha's ten mile fra' Bradford an' tha'll be lucky ta get back there this week."

But his words were wasted. The stranger sank down on to the running board and then slumped sideways into the snow.

* * * *

The change which came over Nigel Toler was subtle. It was not a sudden awakening, but rather a gradually increasing awareness of his senses. He lay on his back, heavily warm, listening in the clock-shattered silence. The opening of his eyes was purposeless, for the darkness was impenetrable. He lay quite still, trying to think. For a moment he had no memory. His whole existence was confined to that hideous, eye-gouging blackness: the hot, heavy bed, with its high, hard pillows, was the boundary of his experience. He tried to move and became aware of a dull, insistent ache which spread from the base of his skull, down around his jaws and across his shoulders. He moved again and the ache flared up into a sharp, vicious pain. Again he lay quite still and listened.

Gradually his memory resumed its function and new fears crept over him. It seemed that a slender naked body dangled before him in the darkness. A scream-racked body which writhed grotesquely as the merciless stripes multiplied across the unprotected flesh. Thin rivulets of blood coursing slowly downwards. And then it seemed the shrieks of pain dissolved into a subtler cry. The howling of the wind across a snow-bound landscape.

His mind cleared, and as he struggled painfully into a sitting position, a single word stabbed through his mind.

Bradford!

Somehow, by some means, and with what purpose he could not guess, he was in Yorkshire. Someone he did not know had befriended him and saved him from the snow. He could remember no more than that.

He struggled out from beneath the oppressive blankets and rose unsteadily to his feet. For a moment his head spun wildly and then cleared again. He smiled mirthlessly when he realized that he was clad only in a flannel night-shirt. For a few moments he groped along the wall in search of the light switch, but then stopped as he realized that the air was heavy with the smell of paraffin.

"Oil lamps," he muttered. "Blast! "

He groped his way to the door and opened it carefully. It swung outwards at the head of a short flight of stairs at the foot of which he could glimpse a corner of a dimly lit, heavily furnished room. He could hear a wood fire crackling and a woman humming softly to herself.

Then his head began to swim sickeningly again. He shut the door and fell back into the bed. As soon as he was lying down he felt better, but he knew that he must rest for a little while at least before he tried to do anything.

Ten minutes, or perhaps a quarter of an hour, elapsed before he heard footsteps on the stairs. He heard a man go into the adjacent room. Then his door opened and a woman came in bearing an oil lamp in one hand and an armful of clothes in the other. She was huge bosomed, broad hipped and rosy cheeked. She set the lamp down on the table beside the bed and draped the clothes over the back of a chair.

"Oh, you're awake," she said. "How are you feeling now?" She did not have the broad dialect of the man who had rescued him, but even so Yorkshire was clearly in her voice.

"I feel all right now," he said. "Was it your husband who picked me up?"

"Aye, that was my Jon. But we mustn't talk about that now. You must get to sleep. Then, in the morning, I think

I'll get Jon to run you in to Bradford to the hospital, if the roads are clear. They'll be able to look after you properly."

He raised his head painfully.

"Oh, no," he said. "I'll be as right as rain in the morning."

"We won't argue about it now. But you should be looked at. You might have caught all sorts of things wandering about in that there snow storm. Proper gizzard it was."

Despite his pain and his worries, Toier only with difficulty managed to suppress a grin.

"I'm sure I'll be all right."

"Well we'll see about that in the morning. I've dried your clothes, and the things out of your pockets are on the table there. Now you go to sleep."

"I don't know how I can thank you."

"Don't you worry about that. Couldn't let you freeze to death now, could we?"

With that she picked up the lamp, wished him good night and left him alone in the darkness once more.

Then he began to think. It did not take him long to decide that he dare not let them take him to hospital: he had to get away from here by the morning. If he went to hospital, sooner or later he would have to explain how he came to be wandering about in the snow, and he couldn't. They would say that he had lost his memory. That would mean observation; they wouldn't let him go. Eventually the police would be brought in. Then Scotland Yard would hear about it. Henderson thought he was mad. This would convince everyone that he really was mad. They'd put him in an institution. He'd be trapped for the rest of his life.

He waited a little while longer to allow the farmer and his wife to settle down for the night. Then he slipped out of bed. Cautiously he crossed the room and drew aside the curtains. The snow had stopped and the moon had risen to flood the glistening countryside with hard cold light.

He turned and looked about the room. He could see the dark forbidding shape of an ancient wardrobe and beside it the marble slab of a Victorian wash stand. Beside the big brass bedstead stood the chair over which were draped his clothes. He picked up the jacket, still slightly warm, and stiff from too rapid drying.

He dressed quickly and then went to the table beside the bed to collect his belongings. Wallet. Keys. Handkerchief. Cigarettes. Matches. Pipe and pouch. Money. Then he stopped. Among his small change was a small square of cardboard. He struck a match. It was the return half of a railway ticket from London to Bradford. He was understanding less and less. But he could not waste time thinking now. He pulled five pounds from his wallet and left them on the table as a thank-offering to these good folk. He put on his overcoat and flung open the window. A moment later he had squeezed himself through and dropped silently down into the snow-covered yard. It was bitterly cold, but the snow had stopped before it could prove a serious impediment. For that he sent up a silent prayer of thanks and hurried off towards the gate. Then, quite arbitrarily, he turned to the right and walked silently through the snow. Two hundred yards farther on, the lane ran into a main road. A signpost stood starkly out against the moonlit snow; one arm pointed to Bradford, ten miles away.

He pulled his coat more closely about his aching shoulders and, gritting his teeth, he hurried on his way.

* * * *

He had lost all accurate account of time, but he felt that he had been walking for about an hour, when he heard a car coming up the road behind him. Then the headlights swept round the corner. It was travelling slowly, for although there was probably less than four inches of snow on the ground, the road surface was treacherous. It pulled up alongside him and a window opened.

"Want a lift?" said a cheery Midlands voice. "I'm going into Bradford, I hope."

"Thanks," called Toler, and climbed into the car. He found himself sitting beside a corpulent man in a tweed overcoat. He was also wearing fur-backed gauntlets, a Balaclava helmet and a bowler hat.

"Bloody awful night," he observed. "Good thing I came along."

"It's very good of you," said Toler. He was thankful,

but surprised, that his benefactor asked no questions as to how he came to be walking along there on such a night; it gave him time to think.

A few moments later the man started talking.

"Blast this snow. I should have been in Bradford by nine, and now it's after midnight. But it's nice having someone along to talk to though."

"I'm terribly grateful to you," said Toler, almost repeating himself; he didn't feel like talking.

"Don't thank me. I hate being alone." He paused. "I'm Sam Harding. Come from Sutton Coldfield. Commercial traveller—in ladies' underclothes. Lingerie, they call it; God knows why." He chuckled. "All transparent frilly nonsense. Damn' stupid, I call it. Why, some of the silly cows would wear it on a night like this. But I'm not grousing. I love them all, the long and the short and the tall." He chuckled again. "If God had given them any brains, and they'd decided to wear sensible woollen combs, I'd be out of a job. Let them wear their silly scanties if they want to. I won't complain."

For some minutes then he drove on in silence.

"Blast this bloody snow!" Then he shot a glance at Toler. "Usually," he said, "I'm not curious about people I pick up. But you must admit it isn't everyone's taste to wander about on the Yorkshire moors in the snow at midnight."

Toler thought quickly.

"I'd been visiting some friends," he said. "My car ran off the road, so I've got to get back to Bradford as best I can and have it towed back in the morning."

"That's rough luck. Good job I came along. Didn't see your car though. Must be covered with snow. Where are you staying in Bradford. Do you live there?"

"No. I'm up here on a visit. I'm staying at the Midland Hotel."

"And I expect the sooner you get there the better you'll like it."

"I will indeed. What I want most is a hot bath and a good night's sleep. I can fix up about the car in the morning."

Twenty minutes later, Toler was dropped at the front

door of the Midland Hotel. He was delighted that his shot in the dark had landed him at the railway hotel. He had had several anxious moments wondering whether there really was a Midland Hotel in Bradford; it was years since he had been there.

He thanked Sam Harding as profusely as he could and, as soon as the car had vanished round the corner, he hurried into the railway station.

An hour later, after a long cold wait on an almost deserted platform, he was asleep in the corner of a compartment of a train bound for London, utterly exhausted.

9

SUPERINTENDENT HENDERSON looked across his desk at Nielson and frowned.

"I don't like the way things are going," he said. "I have no evidence really worth mentioning; but I know that something big is boiling up."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I still have my doubts about the importance of Toler, but I am now convinced that something is going on that we have to stop. I'd like you to tell me, all over again, what you know about this Reismann."

"Look here; why? I've told you twice already. Really, Henderson, this is getting damned tiresome and I'm not prepared to waste any more time."

"I'm sorry you feel that way about it, Nielson, but I'm afraid I must insist. This is important."

"Well suppose you begin by giving me an explanation."

"Why?"

"Look here, Henderson, on Saturday you as good as told me to go away and stop annoying you. Now, on Monday, the whole affair has suddenly become important. Why?"

Henderson got up from his desk and slowly walked across to the window. For some moments he stood looking silently out over London.

"On Saturday night," he said slowly, "Tilbury was keeping an eye on 'The Dragons of Kunming'. About midnight, he was found, not far from there with a knife in his back. On Saturday night, Miss Angela Sansom disappeared. And on Saturday night a young man, believed to be a certain Peter Vesey, was found in a car in Golden Square, not a hundred yards from 'The Dragons of Kunming', with a bullet in his lung. He's in Charing Cross Hospital and is unconscious."

Nielson looked down at his shoes and then raised his head.

"I'm sorry, Henderson," he said. "But why didn't you tell me that in the first place?"

Henderson turned round.

"Because, I suppose, I don't like admitting I'm wrong any more than the next man. I thought it was all hot air. Well—it wasn't."

"What do you want to know?"

"Can I have the whole story? You might have left something out. I doubt it though. I almost know it by heart myself."

And so, starting with the Kowloon adventure and finishing with his first conversation with Angela Sansom, Nielson repeated his story. There was nothing to add. No hint. No clue. Henderson leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"Thanks, Nielson." He paused thoughtfully. "How would you describe Reismann? You're the only person we have who has met him while in complete possession of your senses. Would you say he was a fanatic, or the mercenary type?"

"Why? I don't see how that can possibly affect the issue."

"Look here, Nielson, I can't force you to answer my questions," he snapped, "but I would like to remind you that I am conducting this investigation." He sat very straight and looked directly into Nielson's eyes. "One of my men has been killed," he went on, punctuating his words with his fist on the desk top. "I'm going to find out who did it—with or without your help. Now will you answer my question?"

Nielson sprang to his feet and scowled angrily down.

"If you're going to be offensive, I think I'd better go."

He picked up his cap from the corner of the desk and turned on his heel. Henderson dragged a square of scarlet silk from beneath his jacket and passed it over his brow.

"For heaven's sake, Nielson," he said, "come back and sit down. This is no time to start being childish."

Nielson turned sharply.

"Childish! My God! Who the devil do you think you are?"

Henderson drummed his finger-tips on the edge of his blotter.

"I'm sorry, Nielson. Be a good chap and sit down." He paused. Then softly: "I thought quite a lot of Tilbury."

Nielson scowled again. He hesitated momentarily, and then resumed his seat.

"All right then. . . . What do you want to know?"

"I want to know your opinion of Reismann from what you remember of him. Did he strike you as being a possible fanatic?"

"Yes. Definitely. But why?"

"I'll tell you. So far as we know, Reismann was a spy during the war for both Germany and Japan. If he is a fanatic, he may still be working for what is left of Fascism, in Germany and elsewhere. If on the other hand he is a mercenary, he may now quite well be working for Russia; it would be more profitable, I imagine. You see it alters our direction of approach."

"Yes, I see."

"Now, would you say he was cunning?"

"He struck me as being infernally clever and as cunning as the very devil. I've never seen a finer piece of surgery than the job he did on Toler, but when I met him I had a strange feeling that surgery wasn't his only line. That was before anyone got suspicious. I can't explain it, but he seemed to have cunning stamped all over his face. Somehow he reminded me of a snake." Nielson paused. "No, not a snake—a mongoose."

Henderson made a face.

"A nice point," he said. By now he had completely regained his composure. He tucked the scarlet handkerchief back into his waistcoat pocket and offered Nielson a cigarette. Nielson supplied a light from a large duralumin lighter: a souvenir of his stay in North Africa during the war.

"And supposing you agree that he's cunning?" Nielson asked, as he blew a cone of grey smoke towards the dirty ceiling.

"If we assume, and it still has to be proved, that Toler's disappearance is connected with Reismann, and that Reismann killed poor old Tilbury, several points of interest arise . . . and they don't tie in."

"Well?"

"Look at it this way, Nielson. Why should someone go to absurd lengths to terrorize Toler and then kidnap him, when they are prepared to kill a policeman in cold blood? So far as we know, Toler has no information, or anything else, which could possibly interest a prospective enemy, so therefore why bother to frighten him? Why wasn't he knifed—or shot perhaps?"

Nielson tapped the ash from his cigarette.

"What's your guess?" he murmured.

"To my mind there are three possibilities. Firstly that Reismann is just a figment of Toler's disordered imagination. In that case Toler's disappearance is due to some sort of mental blackout and Tilbury's death is just one of those things that are liable to happen in Soho. Secondly, we can assume that Reismann is all Toler makes him out to be. In which case the whole affair is all part of some fiendishly clever scheme."

"And thirdly?" Nielson asked.

"And thirdly, Nielson . . . Reismann exists and Toler is one of his agents!"

Nielson sprang angrily from his chair.

"Look here, Henderson," he cried, "I'm not going to stand for that. I can personally vouch for Toler."

"Hold your horses, Nielson," he said quietly. "It was only a suggestion."

"All right then. But what about Miss Sansom?"

"I'm afraid that at the moment, I'm not prepared to trust Miss Sansom very far either."

"What do you mean?"

"I tried to get her on the phone yesterday morning. When her mother told me that she had disappeared I decided to go out to Maidenhead myself. I had quite a chat with Mrs. Sansom and believe me I was not impressed. By Miss Angela, that is. Mrs. Sansom is a delightful woman. The good lady was obviously upset and I had quite a job trying to find out what I wanted. In the end I came to the conclusion, reading between the lines, that young Angela is not a particularly pleasant type. What her politics are I'm sure I don't know. But of one thing I am sure—the girl is just a lazy good-for-nothing. Sexually, at any rate, her morals are comparable with those of the average rabbit in

springtime. . . . In fact that's an insult to the average rabbit. And another thing. Before she left home on Saturday evening she told her mother that she was going to meet you. I know that isn't true because you'd have told me by now. But her mother swears that she was picked up by a man in a car outside her home at about eight o'clock on Saturday evening. Who the man was we don't know, but we'll find out sooner or later."

"That's strange, to say the least of it," said Nielson after a pause.

"It's damned fishy."

Nielson drew back the corners of his mouth and frowned. He had rather liked what he had seen of Angela Sansom.

Henderson said: "What happened after you left here with her on Saturday morning?"

"I took her to have some coffee. She wanted to do something, but I told her that whatever we did would have to be very carefully thought out. It was obvious to me that if we were to start anything on our own 'The Dragons' was the only place we could start. But if that place is more than it seemed we'd only be cutting our own throats to rush into it bald headed. I told her I'd think things over and ring her up."

"And did you?"

"No. I hadn't thought up an angle, and as the place isn't open on Sundays, I thought I could leave it till to-day. I've been worried as hell, but so far as I can see there's nothing I can do to help Toler yet."

"You don't think she could have gone off and tried to start something on her own?"

"Possibly. I don't know. I say! You don't think she could have been with this chap you say was shot?"

"Hardly. That's stretching things a bit. But we'll find out as soon as he can talk. And if that is the case . . ."

The telephone rang.

Henderson picked it up and announced his identity. For some moments he listened silently. Then:

"Right ho. Hold him there and I'll come along right away." He replaced the receiver in its cradle and frowned at Nielson. "They've picked Toler up at King's Cross."

"Splendid—is he all right?"

"Yes, he's fit enough. He just got off an overnight train from Bradford, Yorkshire."

"'Struth!"

"I'm going to collect him. You'd better come along too."

* * * *

The dull façade of King's Cross Station glistened damply in the cold sunlight as the black police car drew up at the kerb. A uniformed railway police constable stepped forward to open the door and saluted as Henderson and Nielson climbed out.

"Good morning, sir," he said, "will you come this way please?"

With an air of irresistible solemnity the man led the way across the crowded station and eventually ushered them into the Station Master's office. That gentleman was not, however, present.

Henderson looked quickly round the room and then strode across to the motionless form which lay, covered with an overcoat, on the floor beside the desk. He looked down at the still white face and turned to the two plain-clothes men who were standing by.

"Toler?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. The doctor's on his way now," answered the taller of the two, from behind the upturned collar of his overcoat. "Johnson here just rang up."

"What happened?" Henderson snapped.

"We brought him along here as soon as we recognized him," Johnson answered. "I'd just finished ringing you up, sir, and then when I turned round, he just looked at me, blank-like, and folded up as though he'd been coshed."

"What did you do?" asked Henderson.

"Irwin and me couldn't bring him round so we straightened him out and put my coat over him. Then we phoned for the doctor."

"How long has he been out?"

"Oh, round about ten minutes, I should say, sir. It's high time the sawbones was here."

"That won't be necessary." It was Nielson who spoke. He was on his knees beside the unconscious Toler.

Henderson turned.

"Sorry, Nielson. Forgot about you for a moment. Will he be all right?"

"Yes, if he's allowed to rest."

"What is it?"

"I should say complete mental and physical exhaustion." Then to Irwin: "Did he say anything before he passed out?"

"No, sir, not a word. One queer thing though."

"What?"

"Well, sir, all the time before he collapsed he kept rubbing his neck as though it was hurting him. I asked him if he was all right, but he just wouldn't answer me."

"I see." Nielson was obviously concerned. He took off his cap and laid it on the floor. He ran his fingers through his greying hair and then looked up at Henderson.

"Will you give me a hand?" he asked.

"What are you going to do?"

"I want to have a look at the back of his neck. Could you just lift his shoulders while I undo his collar?"

"Surely." Henderson dropped on one knee and, after adjusting his trousers so that the minimum damage would be done to his immaculate crease, complied with Nielson's wishes.

The Squadron Leader quickly untied Toler's tie and flicked the stud from its hole. Then he gently pulled down the collar of his shirt. Nielson passed his finger-tips slowly down the back of Toler's neck. He whistled softly.

"I wonder how he came by those," murmured Henderson, as he saw the double row of small circular black bruises down the back of Toler's neck. He looked at Nielson.

"What's your guess?"

"I hope we'll find out when he comes round."

"I suggest we get him to hospital as quickly as we can, and I'll have one of my men with him night and day."

Nielson's brow puckered.

"I shouldn't do that if I were you."

"Then what do you suggest?" Henderson asked.

"Let me take him back to his place at Laleham. I think he'll recover rather better in familiar surroundings."

"Sorry, Nielson, but I can't allow that."

"Why not?"

"You forget that just at the moment the gravest suspicions rest on Mr. Toler's shoulders. I cannot possibly run the risk of losing him."

Nielson showed his clenched teeth expressively.

"Look here, Henderson," he said, "I don't want to argue here, but there's one thing you've got to understand. Toler has been under great nervous strain, and there's a limit to how much a man of his mentality can stand. If you're not careful you'll have your star witness pushing up daisies or gracing a mental home."

"I prefer to regard him as a suspect."

"Don't be such a bloody fool." Softly.

Henderson was about to remonstrate when the door opened to admit the police surgeon. He was a short stout man, clad in a heavy black overcoat and a small bowler hat. Pince-nez jogged precariously on the bridge of his nose.

"Morning Johnson . . . Irwin," he bellowed affably. "Ah, Henderson—you here too? Where's the patient?"

Henderson and Nielson rose to their feet.

"Over here, Doctor," said Henderson, stepping aside.

"I'm afraid you've been called out unnecessarily, Doctor," Nielson put in.

The Doctor looked at him reproachfully, and then, seeing the twisted serpents on his lapels, nodded brusquely.

"I see," he said. "Is he all right?"

"I think so. He just needs peace and quiet."

Henderson coughed.

"Doctor Andrews," he said formally, "this is Squadron Leader Nielson."

The two men shook hands. Andrews was about to speak when Toler stirred. Nielson dropped to his knees as the tired eyes slowly opened.

"It's all right, Nigel," he said. "Don't worry. I'm taking you home." He looked up at Henderson. "O.K., Henderson?"

The Superintendent sighed.

"All right," he said, "but I insist on a twenty-four-hour guard."

"I hardly think that will be necessary. I don't think they'll try to molest him again."

"I wasn't thinking of protecting him, Nielson. Anyway, who's going to look after him?"

"I will. I'm on leave at the moment, and I've told my wife I won't be able to get home for a few days."

"Very well then. Johnson and Irwin, carry Mr. Toler to the car, will you please."

10

ANGELA struggled viciously to free herself from the unseen arms which encircled her body. Desperately she plucked at the hood covering her face, but by some means it was tightly fastened about her neck. She felt herself being carried back the way she had come. She screamed, but the sounds seemed to be trapped within the mask. Her kicking feet met nothing but the cold night air. Far away she heard a man's voice, hoarse and uncouth.

"For Christ's sake shut this bitch up."

A heavy fist drove into her solar plexus. She gasped as the muscles contorted agonizingly within her. Her captor swung her round and threw her, like a sack, over his shoulder. Gulping for breath, she was sickened by the dust and dirt inside the hood.

A door opened heavily, and she felt herself carried down a flight of steep wooden steps. She counted them—thirteen. They passed through a dank, hollow-sounding place which echoed and re-echoed the heavy footsteps. Gradually the pain wore off, but she had not the spirit to fight. She lay there, numb and cold with fear. Her only hope lay in the chance that Peter had escaped.

Again thirteen steps, upwards. A door squeaked open and a moment later she felt a cold breeze ruffle her skirts. An engine started smoothly close at hand. The door of the car opened and she was thrown heavily into the seat. A man sat down beside her, there was the sound of rattling metal. Handcuffs clicked about her wrists. A chain was wrapped tightly around her ankles; a padlock snapped. The same voice as before, close to her ear:

"If you don't want another poke in the guts, sit still and behave yourself."

For a long time the car sped smoothly through the night. When they stopped, the only sounds to reach her ears were the whisper of the wind and the rustle of naked trees. She

was lifted bodily from her seat and carried through the open for perhaps fifty yards. Then a short flight of stone steps leading downwards. A door banged shut behind them, and the air became suddenly warmer.

A few moments later she was dropped into a softly upholstered chair and the hood was dragged from her face. She blinked dazedly in the brilliant light and then, as her eyes accommodated themselves, looked nervously about her. The room was sumptuously furnished. The walls were painted a soft smooth cream, and hung with exquisite Japanese embroideries. There were no windows, but a huge bevelled mirror draped with rich crimson curtains prevented this from being oppressive. There were several deep easy chairs upholstered in cream leather and enlivened with richly embroidered cushions. Directly in front of her stood a magnificent desk of black Japanese lacquer work. From behind it a man looked down at her.

His face, parchment white, was devoid of expression. Only the eyes were alive, gleaming out from above high, prominent cheek-bones. A strip of plaster held a dressing on the bridge of his nose and a new scar ran across his mouth. Beside him stood a tall, thick-set woman of middle age, dressed in a long shapeless gown of unrelieved black. Her mouth was a thin drooping line. Angela held her gaze for a moment and then looked away. Beside the door stood two men. One was a little rat-faced creature in a maroon chauffeur's uniform; the other was a great unshaven thug whose hands toyed nervously with a broken-peaked cap.

"Good evening, Miss Sansom," said the man behind the desk. "You do not know me. My name is Reismann. Carl Reismann."

With his hand he indicated the woman who stood at his side.

"This is my wife, Paula."

Angela looked once more towards the woman, and then saw something she had not noticed before. From her narrow belt there dangled a rosary. Seeming to read Angela's mind, Reismann laughed shortly.

"Do not be misled, Miss Sansom," he said, "Torquemada also was a Christian."

Angela's lips trembled.

"What have you done with him?" she demanded.

"With whom?" Reismann smiled.

"Nigel Toler. Where is he, you cold-blooded devil? What have you done with him?"

"My dear Miss Sansom, you seem to be rather upset. I'm sorry if my men frightened you, but you are, I think, rather jumping to conclusions."

"Where is he?" Her voice rose to a scream. "Where is he?"

The woman left her husband's side and stood close to Angela. Then she slapped her viciously across the face.

"Behave yourself, girl!" Her voice was thick with Teutonic gutturals.

Angela opened her mouth in astonishment and then burst into tears.

Reismann waited a few moments and continued: "So far as I know, Miss Sansom," he said calmly, "there is no reason why Mr. Toler should not be safely in his own bed right now. I had a little chat with him about twenty-four hours ago and we now understand each other perfectly. I have no further interest in him."

"What did you do with him?" Angela sobbed.

"I assure you, Miss Sansom, that when I parted with Mr. Toler, he was in the best of health."

"You're lying."

"My dear girl, you are obviously overwrought. I think that before we can continue our interview you had better have some rest." Then, turning to the little chauffeur: "Higgs, the keys, if you please."

The man stepped forward and pulled a small bunch of keys from his pocket. He quickly unfastened the handcuffs and then dropped on his knees to release her ankles. He inserted the key in the lock and looked up into Angela's face. Then with a sickly leer he ran his hand slowly up her nylon-clad calf. Reismann slammed his fist on the desk top.

"Stop that, Higgs," he cried.

The man winced. As quickly as he could he opened the padlock, picked up the chain, and rejoined his companion by the door.

Angela felt sick. In her eyes Reismann had suddenly become all-powerful.

Paula took her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. Reismann smiled again.

"Sleep well," he said.

"Come," Paula ordered. Angela could not resist. She followed her meekly across the room and through the door into a narrow, softly lit corridor, floored with a thick blue carpet. A few yards along this passage the woman stopped to unlock a door. A light was switched on and Angela was ushered into a small windowless bedroom. The same rich blue carpet covered the floor. The walls were covered with quilted silk damask. The bed itself, beautiful in its balanced simplicity, was of polished blonde mahogany. The dressing-table—the only other piece of furniture in the room, apart from a small bedside table—was of the same wood, and was laid out with every beauty preparation a woman could desire. The bed was made up with sparklingly white linen and was covered with a sleek quilted counterpane.

Paula spoke. Her English was more laboured than Angela had realized.

"You vill please strip."

Angela cringed. Why, in heaven's name, couldn't the creature say 'undress'? She turned and faced the woman. Looking into those steely eyes all power to refuse went from her. As she took off her clothes the woman took them from her and threw them over her arm. When she had shed the last of her undergarments she straightened herself and stood naked, shivering nervously. The woman examined her body steadily with her eyes. There was envy in that gaze; a cold destructive envy. She cleared her throat noisily.

"You will put on ze pajamas under ze pillow."

Angela picked them up, mere wisps of black chiffon. In other circumstances they would have sent her heart beating with joy.

"Put zem on," the woman ordered.

Angela obeyed silently. The woman rummaged in an unseen pocket in her dress and produced a small round box. From it she extracted a white tablet and offered it to Angela.

"Take it," she ordered.

Angela backed away.

"Take it," Paula repeated. "It is for sleep. Zere is water beside ze bed."

Mutely Angela obeyed.

"You have ten minutes. Ze bassroom is zere." She pointed to a door on the far side of the room. Then, taking the armful of clothes, she went out into the corridor and locked the door behind her.

* * * *

It was beyond her comprehension to know how long she slept. When at last she awoke the light was burning and Paula was standing beside the bed.

"Come," she said. "Ze Herr Doktor is waiting."

Angela sat up and climbed unwillingly out of bed. Her mind was not yet fully awake, but her heart was racing madly. The woman handed her a dressing-gown of quilted orange satin; the skirt was long and flowing; the shoulders arrogantly squared.

"Put zis on."

Angela obeyed silently, and slipped her feet into the satin mules which lay beside the bed.

"Come."

Angela followed her meekly back to the room in which she had first met Reismann. The doctor was sitting at his desk, toying with a golden pen. Beside him stood the thug who had kidnapped her. He was gagged and his wrists were bound. He was held firmly between two men whose faces were hidden behind improvised masks of surgical lint.

"Come in, Miss Sansom," said Reismann. "I will not keep you long. Sit down if you please."

She seated herself in the chair she had occupied before and eyed the group around the desk in mute fascination.

"About twelve hours ago, Miss Sansom," Reismann said, "you were under the impression that I had murdered Mr. Toler."

"Where is he?" she murmured. "Please. Where is he?"

"Miss Sansom, you are over anxious. Mr. Toler should be quite safe. . . . I have not harmed him."

"You lying swine! Where is he?"

Reismann frowned. Paula stepped forward. Angela crouched back in her chair.

"No!" she squealed. "Please. . . ."

But Paula grabbed her by the wrist and with studied viciousness, slapped her twice across the face, knocking her head from side to side.

"And now, Miss Sansom," Reismann went on, "perhaps you will allow me to continue."

"What do you want me for?" Angela sobbed. "Why don't you let me go home?"

"Be patient, my dear. I am an orderly man. Your turn will come."

She opened her mouth to speak, but the look in Paula's glistering eyes silenced her. Reismann smiled.

"To you, Miss Sansom," he said smoothly, "my profession must appear rather unusual. But it is an honourable profession. My sole object is to civilize the world and bring humanity to fulfilment. You are probably one of those fools who believe that National Socialism is dead, and that the New Order is lost for ever. But you are wrong. I, Miss Sansom, I will bring that majestic plan to fruition." He paused, and appeared to be thinking keenly. "Men must die if justice is to be served, and great objectives gained. . . . But murder I abhor. I have asked you to leave your bed in order that you may appreciate my love of justice. This man." He pointed to the manacled tough. "This creature has committed murder. I cannot tolerate that. He should be tried in a court of law and hanged by his worthless neck. That, however, cannot be. I must be both judge and jury."

Angela sickened. As she looked round the room, from face to face, the whole scene became invested with a nauseating, terrifying unreality. Reismann turned towards the prisoner; his brow furrowed darkly.

"Sykes," he said, "last night you murdered an English policeman for no other reason than to satisfy your primitive lust for blood. He could not possibly have hindered our plan. You have disobeyed me and are therefore of no further value." He paused impressively. "If this were Japan, and you were a man of honour, you would end your life by *hara-kiri*, and join your ancestors free from all taint.

But you are not a man of honour—you are scarcely a man—and so you must have assistance."

He picked up a narrow-bladed knife with a carved ivory handle.

"Do you know what I mean by *hara-kiri*, Sykes? No. Of course you do not. Poor ignorant fool. It means, Sykes, honourable suicide; death by disembowelment." Reismann laughed. For the first time Angela could see through his veneer of sanity. The room was beginning to rock. Desperately she wished she could faint. Sykes had become deathly pale and was attempting to speak from behind his gag. He swayed between his jailers.

"*Hara-kiri*." Reismann laughed again. "Means rip belly!"

He turned and pressed a button set into the desk top. A section of the wall behind him swung inwards to reveal an empty concrete cell lit by a solitary bulb.

"Sammy."

One of the masked men bowed his head deferentially.

"Mitsumu?"

"Take the knife, Sammy, and do that which must be done."

The man took the knife from Reismann and bowed again. Sykes was dragged, struggling, into the concrete cell. Reismann pressed the button again and the door closed heavily.

Angela's hands, sticky with sweat, clawed helplessly at the arms of her chair. Her stomach heaved. Her head swam wildly. Reismann looked into her eyes, coldly and steadily.

For a moment, time ceased to exist.

"Don't! Don't!" she yelled. "You can't . . ."

She stopped.

From beyond the wall came a strangled, choking scream. And then silence.

Angela closed her eyes, and opened them again as the room began to rock and twist. Her head swelled and whirled. Faster. Faster. Far away, Reismann's face hung in the air, grinning silently down at her. A sickening roar pounded in her ears. The walls dissolved. 'The floor rose up to meet her face.

Then there was darkness and silence.

* * * *

When she regained consciousness she was again lying in that luxurious bed. Her awakening was clear and well defined and it did not seem strange that Paula should be by her side. For a moment she gazed blankly up at the woman. Then the horror of her last awakening rushed back to her and her mouth dried up. Paula's lip curled.

"Come."

Trembling with fear, Angela once more donned the quilted gown and allowed herself to be ushered back into Reismann's presence.

"Sit down, Miss Sansom," he ordered from behind his desk. "I trust you are refreshed."

Angela did not answer.

Reismann laughed gently and leaned back in his chair.

"Miss Sansom," he said, "you will probably never know why you were brought here in the first place. The reason was no real concern of yours. But it was vitally necessary. Shall we say that I invested in you as an insurance policy. Even so, you never constituted a danger to my work. However, I now realize the depths of my wisdom. You see, you gave yourself away. You know something, and you are going to tell me. Make no mistake, you will tell me."

Angela bit her lip. Her hands had suddenly gone cold.

"What do you mean?"

"You are the daughter of Brigadier Ian Sansom, D.S.O. and Bar, M.C., etc., etc., of the Allied Control Commission in Berlin?"

She passed her tongue across her bloodless lips.

"Yes." There seemed no point in lying. If only she had told someone where she was going. Then they might have traced her. Henderson might have been able to rescue her. Now, unless Peter Vesey had escaped, she had no hope. She could never get out of this place alive. But Reismann was speaking again.

"And you are a very inquisitive young lady? That is so, is it not?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I run the restaurant known as 'The Dragons of Kunming' to make a little money now that I can no longer draw an income from either Berlin or Tokyo. It is very popular with overseas visitors to this distressing land of yours, and I manage to make a very good income out of it. Nevertheless, of course, I resent hiding behind a decadent Chinese façade, but there is really no alternative. 'The Dragons of Kunming' does however serve another useful purpose. My waiters and my dancing girls have sharp ears, and you would be surprised how much useful information I pick up from people who become too free with their tongues."

"Why tell me all this? I know nothing that would interest you." She spoke with difficulty. Her voice was flat and toneless.

"Your father, Miss Sansom, is in London at present. But he is not, as you perhaps imagine, on leave. He is here to attend a conference on the rise of underground Nazi activity in Germany. The object of the conference is to decide on ways and means of crushing that activity. While you were dining in 'The Dragons of Kunming' on Saturday evening, I am now informed, you said that you had read a secret report dealing with the subject of this conference. It is of the most vital importance that I know what was in that report. You are going to tell me."

"I won't!" She wanted to scream. She wanted to curse her father for not putting the document in the safe, where it belonged. And she wanted to curse herself for reading it.

"Do not be stupid, Miss Sansom. You cannot fight me and win. Tell me what you know."

"Go to hell!"

"Miss Sansom, I have at my disposal innumerable methods for causing acute mental discomfort; my wife is more primitive and prefers the physical approach to coercion. In either case there is a limit to what even a healthy young woman can stand. It would therefore be most stupid of you to attempt to resist me, particularly as I am, most probably, already in possession of the information you are determined to withhold. Even so, I cannot afford to assume that, that is so. Therefore you must tell me. Please do not compel me to resort to force."

Her face was stiff and lifeless. She never knew where she 'got the courage to say it.

"You can break every bone in my body, but I'll never talk."

But she knew it wasn't true.

"My child, I admire your courage. But as I bear you no ill will, let me first explain. Then perhaps you will change your mind and share your little secret with me. You know little of the world and the way it is going. I will explain.

"To-day there are three major ideologies in conflict. The sentimental softness of the so-called Western Democracies. The fighters for lost causes; the champions of justice without logic. They are admirable, but they cannot survive much longer. Secondly, there is Soviet Russia, the link between the worst of East and West. A universal proletariat, ruled by the lowest possible type of proletarian grafter. And then there is the New Order, temporarily eclipsed because of internal treachery, not as you probably imagine, because of the strength of the so-called Allies.

"In 1939 the Third Reich attacked Poland in order to come to grips with Russia. At that time, had she had the strength, your country would have declared war on Russia as well as on Germany. After all, Russia invaded Poland just as certainly as did Germany. Yet only now are the common people of your country realizing that Russia was no more a friend to Britain than she was to Germany. Had not the British interfered in 1939, Germany would not have had to delay her attack upon Russia, and the greatest threat to human progress the world has ever known would have been destroyed within a year. The Russians attempted the impossible. All men are not equal. If you treat them as such the result is inevitably chaos. This fact soon became obvious to the rulers of Russia, so that now a monstrous, perverted, pseudo aristocracy has been created, in order that they may still attempt to develop their lie. But already in Russia there are the seeds of chaos. And if her form of government is not destroyed it will destroy the world.

"Twenty years ago, Adolf Hitler realized that the only route to universal peace lay through power. The common man is a fool. He must be ruled with a rod of iron. Only when he has been rigidly subordinated to those with the

vision to guide his destiny, can he be educated eventually to appreciate the truth and the beauty to which he is entitled.

"Sooner or later the people of the world must choose between the rod of iron and ultimate truth and beauty, and the chaos of Soviet Communism. There is no middle course. Germany and Japan are in defeat, but the glorious spirit of the New Order is springing once more into wonderful life. The Western Democracies are doomed. They cannot last more than a few decades at the most. You have two alternatives from which to choose. The New Order or Communism? Beauty within the century or chaos for a thousand years? Freedom or slavery? Life or death? The choice may well lie in your hands, and in your hands alone. What is it to be, Miss Sansom? Will you tell me your secret now—or later?"

Throughout this speech, it was nothing less, Reismann had sat perfectly still in his chair, gazing intently into Angela's eyes, and spoke with the calm solemnity of a parson reciting his newly finished sermon to his wayward curate. For some time Angela could not find the words to speak. She just sat there fascinated, almost forgetting her fear. Mad or sane, the man was sincere; he meant every word he said.

She sat up slowly, and licked her lips. She did not tremble any more. She looked him straight in the eye.

"I will tell you nothing," she said. But she had to go on. It was the only blow she could strike for decency. With her breath coming in painful sobbing gusts she forced it out, word by word.

"You're wrong. The only difference between the Nazis and the Communists is that they can't decide who shall be boss. They're rotten. Rotten to the core. They're rotten the way you are. Mad and rotten. We'll wipe both of them off the face of the earth. And just as soon as we can get rid of men like you, things like that won't ever be able to happen again. No, damn you! I won't tell you a blasted thing. . . ." Her voice tailed away into harsh dry sobs, but she had said it. She felt cleaner. In some small way she had made up for the things she had done, and for the things she had neglected to do.

Reismann sighed and beckoned to his wife.

"Take her away," he said wearily. "Take her away. You know what to do with her."

* * * *

No medieval torture chamber of rack and fires and thumbscrews. No reek of brimstone. No shrieks of the damned. No modern hell on earth of wires and chairs and ominous straps. No hint of horror. But a bed of cool linen with a quilt of rich blue satin. A small tablet on her tongue, washed down with water from a crystal glass. And darkness and sleep. . . .

Sleep. . . .

But it was sleep such as she had never slept before. Her mind seemed to hover, disembodied, in a ghastly wakefulness. Was it a dream? If it was, it was a dream of cold transfinite space. Her body swam below her, a comet in a dreadful firmament of hate.

It was the sleep of death. Death of the damned who know no peace with God. She saw her body, ashes to ashes, moulder before her, dust to dust. The sleep of death. The sleep that gives no rest. The parting of the ways. The body to dust and ashes; the spirit for ever condemned to wander through the seventh hell of loneliness on the outermost rim of space. It was the sleep of death. Death without the sanction of the gods of men. For from it sprang a wakefulness more terrible than death.

She lay on her back in the darkness and screamed. She took the satin quilt between her teeth to stop her screams; then screamed lest she should sleep that sleep again.

The darkness huddled about her, crushing the shrieks from her lungs. Yet she could not name the horror which paralysed her mind. She had no thought of Reismann or his threats and theories. She had no secrets which she must not tell. She was alone in the darkness, screaming at a nameless dread; praying to an unknown god that she should not sleep again.

Yet her cries grew weaker and at length were stilled. The ashes and the spirit went their separate ways. Ashes to earth, and spirit to hell beyond the gates of time. And then again the return to wakefulness.

But now there was light and Paula standing beside the bed.

"Vill you speak?"

She sobbed but could not scream.

"No. . . . Never,"

And so she died again.

Three times came resurrection and light.

And three times more the shroud of death wrapped round her. No longer could she scream, only lie in the darkness cowering at the feet of death.

"Come," said Paula, when for the fourth time light returned.

"Come! "

Lifelessly Angela rose from her bed and slipped her arms into the sleeves of the gown which lay across the foot of the bed. Then as her mind slowly threw off the slough of death she tremulously advanced and followed the woman into Reismann's presence.

"Sit down, Miss Sansom," he ordered.

He looked at her carefully, almost paternally.

"You look tired, my dear. Have you not slept?"

"You swine," she hissed. Then she looked round her quickly, expecting to be slapped.

Reismann grinned.

"No, Miss Sansom," he purred, "my wife has left us. Now let us come to the point."

"No. I won't tell you. I won't! "

He smiled.

"Will you not tell me, here and now, what you know? Or must it be torn from you word by word? Think, my dear child, however noble you imagine you are being, you are really being very stupid. I do not really expect that you know anything of any great value. I did not bring you here to obtain information. But since I have now learned that you know something that would interest me, I am determined to find out what it is. I have been very gentle with you up to now. Very gentle. Yet how you screamed, you poor child. You were just afraid of the dark. There are much worse things than darkness. . . . And much worse things than death. Will you not tell me?"

The placid expression suddenly vanished from his face.

He crashed his fist down upon the desk and sprang to his feet.

"Tell me!" he screamed.

Angela clawed at the arms of her chair. The sobs hovered in her throat. Reismann became calm again. He slowly lit a long Russian cigarette.

"The only good thing that ever came out of Russia," he remarked pleasantly.

Angela's mind was too racked with terror to feed words to her lips. She sat gazing at him, gasping helplessly.

"Miss Sansom," he went on, "I am half German and half Japanese. But I count myself as almost solely the latter. You may liken me to the mule in the Arabian saying: If you ask a mule, 'What was your father?' he will reply, 'My mother was a horse'. You may therefore expect from me a measure of mercy. . . . When it is deserved. My wife, on the other hand, is doubly to be feared. She is German and was never beautiful. She hates you because you are English, whereas I merely despise you, and also because you are a desirable woman. I have already permitted her almost to break your spirit. She is looking forward to receiving my permission to break your beautiful body. Now, my dear young lady, will you not avail yourself of my mercy? Let me save you from her viciousness. You may never know why you were brought here, but it was my intention that you should not suffer because of it. Tell me what it is you know and you will not be uncomfortable. That is, unless I have erred in my judgment of men."

"No! I won't. I won't. I won't."

At that moment Paula burst into the room and rushed to her husband's side. She whispered excitedly in his ear.

"*Himmel!*" he cried. Then he looked at Angela coldly.

"I fear, Miss Sansom, that the choice is now out of my hands. I cannot save you now."

"What do you mean?" Angela gasped, shrinking back into her chair.

"I am afraid, my dear, that you have been betrayed."

"Betrayed? What do you mean? I . . . I . . ." Her voice was breaking at every word; terror was battering her mind into a frenzy.

"You may return to your bed, my dear. Paula will look after you."

"No! No-o-o-o. . . ." Then she finally broke down into shrieking hysterics.

"Paula. . . . Take her away."

The woman took her by the arm and dragged her to her feet. A moment later she was flung into the bedroom and the door was shut behind her. She staggered, tripped over her own feet and fell heavily to the floor. The shock broke her hysteria and it was replaced by a cold, numb, silent terror. She dragged herself to her feet, instinctively took off the dressing-gown, and sagged against the bed. But before she could lie down the door opened and Paula came back into the room. Her thin, wicked mouth was set in a twisted smile.

"Come," she ordered.

Angela slipped once more to the floor and picked up the dressing-gown from the foot of the bed. Her mind was stubbornly, inflexibly made up, but she no longer had the will physically to disobey.

"You vill not need ze robe," Paula grinned.

Angela shuddered and dropped the garment to the floor. Then she opened her eyes very wide and crouched back against the bed.

"No! No! " she screamed. "Not that! For God's sake, not that!"

11

NIELSON leaned against the end of the piano and looked down at Toler, who sat motionless in the big easy chair in front of the gas fire. He was worried; desperately worried. He had brought Nigel home in the police car on Monday afternoon and had then administered a sedative, under the influence of which he had slept for eighteen hours. Now, as during the whole of the five hours since he had awakened, he had sat in silence, apparently oblivious of his surroundings.

"Nigel," said Joe softly, "don't you understand? You must tell me what happened. If you don't I can't possibly help you."

He stooped to shake Toler's shoulder, but he got no reply.

"Nigel. Please. You've got to pull yourself together." His voice was gentle, but his tone was urgent. He unbuttoned his tunic and ruffled his hair in a gesture of frustration. Dimly through the intervening wall he could hear Constable Naughton patiently pacing up and down the kitchen floor.

"Look, Nigel, the police suspect you of being one of Reismann's agents. Sooner or later you must tell someone what happened after you left Angela Sansom last Friday night. If you tell me now I think I can see to it that the police leave you alone. . . . Otherwise it's out of my hands."

He talked as one talks to a frightened child, but he aroused no response from Toler except a slight trembling of the lips. He walked wearily across the room and sat down on the edge of the divan. For some minutes he gazed helplessly at the back of Nigel's head. He felt defeated. Nothing he had thought of so far had made the slightest impression on Toler. He was reluctant to conclude that his friend had lost his reason. At the same time he could think of nothing else which could account for his strange

behaviour. Nothing, that is, except fear; stark, paralysing fear.

Nielson scratched his ear and lit a cigarette. He was sure that Toler was sane; he was equally sure that he was neither weak willed nor a coward.

His mind was in stalemate, but he could not clear the board and start again. He bit his lip and then slowly raised his eyebrows.

It was only a vague hope.

He got to his feet and crossed to the piano. For some moments he fidgeted on the hard stool and then, with a singular lack of grace, stiffly played the sixteen exquisite bars of Chopin's Prelude in A major. As the final chord faded Toler stirred.

"Beautiful, Joe," he murmured. "Go on."

Nielson straightened himself.

"You know that's all I can play, Nigel. Why don't you play something?"

"No, Joe"—very softly—"I've no heart for it."

Nielson was about to speak again when he heard something drop through the letter box on to the mat in the hall. He rose silently to his feet and left the room to return, almost immediately, bearing the evening paper. He glanced at the headline and then laid it gently in Toler's lap. He resumed his seat on the divan and waited. He no longer wished to cross-question his friend; he had broken down the barrier at last; he had a feeling that before long he would speak of his own free will.

Half an hour later, Toler had not moved. It was getting dark rapidly. As the light faded a thin rain began to peck monotonously at the windows.

Nielson drew the curtains and switched on the light. As he did so Toler opened the paper and began listlessly to scan the headlines. Then his eyes began to rove up and down the columns. Joe watched him anxiously. His face was pale and expressionless. Then, quite suddenly, he snapped the paper taut between his hands. He jerked his eyebrows and sank his teeth into his trembling lip.

Nielson sprang to his side.

"What's the matter, Nigel?" he asked, alarmed. "What is it?"

Toler turned his bloodless face towards Nielson. He was trembling from head to foot. He gulped painfully and grotesquely. Desperately he tried to control his twitching lips.

"Nigel! For God's sake, man! What is it?"

Momentarily Toler clenched his teeth tightly together. Then his jaw sagged and without warning he broke into shrieks of uncontrollable laughter.

Constable Naughton burst into the room.

"What's up, sir?" he cried in horror.

"Get out, man!" Nielson stormed. "Get out!"

Then, gritting his teeth, he struck Toler a sharp blow on the point of the jaw.

Naughton gulped, opened his mouth, and backed out of the room.

But Nielson did not see him go. He leaned over the motionless body that sagged in the chair and waited for the effects of the blow to wear off.

Two minutes later Toler opened his eyes and turned his head wearily.

"I'm sorry I had to do that, old chap," Nielson murmured.

Toler looked up at him steadily.

"She fooled him," he whispered. "He can't hurt her now."

"What d'you mean, Nigel? Tell me."

Toler ran the tip of his tongue slowly across his lips and pointed to the corner of the page which still lay on his knee. Nielson picked up the paper and read the brief paragraph:

WESTMINSTER SUICIDE

London, Tuesday.

Early to-day the police recovered the body of a Chinese woman from the Thames beneath Westminster Bridge. It is estimated that the body had been in the water for about three days. The body was clad in an oriental costume of yellow silk. It has not yet been identified.

Toler sat motionless with his head buried in his hands. Nielson laid his hand gently on his shoulder.

There was nothing he could say.

* * * *

It was some time before Nigel raised his head and began to speak. His voice was hollow and characterless. He spoke as though each word required a great effort of will.

"Go on," said Joe.

Toler closed his eyes. He seemed to be fighting with himself. Then he went on, his voice little more than a whisper.

". . . Carried her in and hung her up by her wrists. . . . Hung a damn' great weight on her feet . . . then they stripped her. . . . Stark naked. . . . Ripped the clothes from her back. . . . Swine called Sammy flogged her with a bundle of whalebone. . . . If I ever tried to interfere with him again she'd get another flogging. . . ."

Toler buried his face in his hands.

"Take it easy, Nigel. Try to tell me everything."

"I can't go on, Joe. . . . It was too horrible."

"You must tell me, Nigel. Hang on, I'll get you a drink."

Nielson poured some rum into the solitary tumbler and pressed it into Nigel's hand.

"Come on, old chap, knock this back."

Toler sipped and coughed a little. Then he threw back his head and drained the glass. He shuddered.

"Better?" Joe asked.

"Thanks, Joe. . . . I'll be all right."

Toler dabbed his lips with his handkerchief and then went on in a whisper.

"Don't know how many times he hit her. . . . Cut her back to bloody tatters before I passed out. . . . Thought that bloody tourniquet would break my neck. . . . Suppose I'm lucky to be here. . . . Last thing I remember was the blood running down the backs of her legs. . . . Dripping down on to the carpet. . . ."

He pounded his fists on the arms of his chair.

"By God, Joe," he cried hysterically, "I'll crucify the swine if I ever see him again."

Nielson gripped his arm.

"Steady, old chap. What happened when you came round?"

"Don't you see, Joe? . . . That's why she drowned herself. . . . Only way she could hurt the bastard. . . . He'll have to kill me to stop me now. . . . I'm going to get him. . . . I'm going to kill him myself, Joe. . . . With or without the police, I'll get him. . . . And, Joe . . . she told me . . . before they started on her. . . . He'd forced her to give me that cigarette. . . . He tortured her father until she agreed to do it. . . . She couldn't help it, Joe. . . ."

Nielson splashed some more rum into Toler's glass.

"We'll get him, Nigel, don't worry about that. Drink that rum and tell me what happened when you came round."

"When I came round, Joe?"

"Yes. Go on, Nigel."

"Found myself wandering round in open country. . . . God, but it was cold. . . . Then it started to snow. . . . Old farmer rescued me. . . . Thought I'd had it. . . . Passed out again. . . . Woke up in bed. . . . Farmer's wife wanted to send me to hospital. . . . Had to get out quick. . . . Found I was ten miles from Bradford. . . . Bradford, Yorkshire. . . . God alone knows how I got there. . . . Walked on for about an hour . . . Then a commercial traveller came along and gave me a lift into Bradford. . . . Had to say my car had broken down and was going to get someone to fetch it next morning. . . . He swallowed that. . . . Good thing he did. . . . Had a return ticket to London in my pocket. . . . Don't know how it got there. . . . Caught the night train back to King's Cross. . . . You know the rest. . . ."

Nielson ran his fingers through his hair. After a moment he said: "Let me have a look at your arms, Nigel."

He helped Nigel off with his jacket and waited for him to roll up his sleeves. He examined both arms carefully and grunted noncommittally when he observed the marks of hypodermic-needle punctures on the left forearm.

"Nigel, why are you so sure that the girl in the river is Mu Tung Ho? They don't even say how old the woman was in the paper."

"I don't know, Joe. . . . She had the courage to do it.

. . . I know that. . . . If I wasn't sure I wouldn't have told you all this . . . would I? . . . What are we going to do now, Joe? . . ."

"First I'm going to phone Henderson, and then you're going to bed."

"Who's Henderson?"

"Scotland Yard. You remember, the chap you saw there in 1940. I promised to ring him up as soon as you told me anything."

Nielson picked up the telephone and waited for the operator to answer.

* * * *

Henderson frowned and rubbed his chin.

"It's a pretty ghastly story, Toler," he said, "but I, quite frankly, find it quite impossible to believe."

It was nine o'clock on Wednesday morning, cold and damp. Henderson sat behind his desk and looked unemotionally across at Toler and Nielson.

Toler raised his head.

"Why?" he asked resentfully. He felt tired and listless.

Henderson straightened his tie carefully before he answered.

"Gentlemen," he said. "You've both seen the body and identified it as the Chinese dancer by the name of Mu Tung Ho. Now you're quite sure of that Nielson?"

"Quite."

"We've heard Toler's story of what happened on Friday night, and if it were true I should not hesitate to put all the resources at my command on the trail of this Reismann. But to quote Mr. Toler, the girl's back was cut to bloody tatters. Correct, Toler?"

"Yes," answered Toler in a low voice. As he spoke he rubbed the palms of his hands together disconsolately.

"And yet," Henderson went on, "the back of the girl down there on the slab is as pure and unblemished as a debutante's."

Toler jerked his head up. His jaw sagged and the tips of his fingers wavered anxiously in front of his lips. He turned his head questioningly to Nielson.

"Joe? What? . . ."

Nielson rose to his feet.

"All right, old chap," he said comfortingly. "Hold on a minute." Then turning to Henderson: "Are you sure of that?"

"Of course I'm sure. And I'll tell you another thing. . . . That isn't the girl I spoke to at 'The Dragons of Kunming' the other night."

"That's hardly surprising," Nielson returned testily. "If she'd been flogged the way Toler describes, she would hardly be in any fit condition to speak to anyone."

Henderson drew a square of yellow silk from beneath his jacket and dabbed his lips.

"Naturally," he said, raising his eyebrows, "but we have no reason to believe that she was flogged at all."

Nielson slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand and puffed out his cheeks. He began to pace the room.

"Look, Henderson," he said, after a few moments. "On Monday morning you as good as told me that you believed what Toler had told you about Reismann. Now you've changed your tune. Why?"

"You misunderstand me. I believe that something fishy is going on in the vicinity of 'The Dragons of Kunming' and that Tilbury's death was a result of that. I also asked you certain questions based on the hypothesis that what Toler had told me about this Reismann is correct. I did not say that I accepted that hypothesis."

"That wasn't the impression I got."

"Then you were mistaken."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I have a good mind to place Toler under arrest."

"What! On what charge?"

Henderson shifted in his chair.

"For giving false information to the police. Suspicion of espionage. I could think of several others too if I wished."

"What! " . . . from Nielson—"Are you crazy?"

"No. But he thinks I am," put in Toler.

"I'm not going to stand for this," Nielson cried, "I demand to see your superior officer."

"Hold it, Joe," said Toler calmly. "I want to say something before this goes any further."

Nielson looked at him. He seemed to have suddenly regained his composure. His hands were still and his face was firmly set.

"All right, Henderson," said Toler. "First of all, on what evidence, if any, do you base those charges?"

Henderson reached out and pressed a button on his desk.

"I take it," he said, "that you would have no objection to my having a record made of this conversation?"

"I don't give a damn," said Toler. "But cut out the nonsense and answer my question."

The door opened and a plain-clothes man entered and sat down by the window, notebook poised.

"Very well," Henderson said, "I'll tell you. 'Last Friday night you left Miss Sansom, in 'The Dragons of Kunming', and did not return. At nine o'clock next morning you checked out of your hotel and returned the suit you had borrowed from the hire firm. I have evidence that you then went to King's Cross Station and bought a ticket to Bradford. From then on your movements are a mystery until seven o'clock on Sunday evening, when you were picked up by a farmer on the Yorkshire moors. You say, however, that you have no recollection of what happened to you after you fainted in Reismann's presence, until you were picked up by Hawthornthwaite."

"You can't arrest me for that."

"And then, Mr. Toler, there is your account of what happened at 'The Dragons of Kunming'. I was there a few hours after you disappeared. There was no Sammy, no Reismann, and in fact, nothing in the least bit suspicious at all."

"Well, that's not my fault either."

"And then there's the girl."

"Well?"

"Look here, Toler, why don't you tell the truth? A lot of people come and spin grizzly yarns to the police when they're not quite feeling themselves and we try to let them down as gently as we can. Why don't you tell me the truth and then go somewhere where they'll look after you properly and have a nice long rest?"

"I've already told you the truth. And I don't need a mental home, if that's what you mean."

Henderson stood up and leaned across his desk.

"Either you're lying about what happened on Friday night or that isn't the girl."

"But it is! I don't give a damn what you think, Henderson! I've told you the truth to the best of my ability and I can do no more than that. Now for God's sake stop badgering me."

Henderson sighed and resumed his seat.

"All right, Fanning," he said, "you can go."

When the door closed behind the detective he added: "And so can you, Toler."

"What do you mean by that?" Nielson exclaimed.

"I mean that Toler is free to go. And the sooner he does the better."

"Then what was the meaning of that little act?"

Henderson rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand.

"I'm sorry, Toler," he said, "but I had to be sure that you were telling the truth, as you believed it to be."

"Well all I can say," said Nielson, "is that for a man in your position you handle things with a singular lack of finesse."

Henderson frowned.

"Do I try to teach you your job, Nielson?"

"I'm sorry, Henderson, but what happens now?"

"So far as you two are concerned, nothing."

"And what about Miss Sansom?" asked Toler. He was angry and had no intention of being brushed aside.

"Look here, Toler, if Miss Sansom chooses to go off for a dirty week-end with some young fool it's nothing to do with me."

Nigel rose to his feet, cheeks blazing.

"I resent that, Henderson!"

"I can't help that, Toler. She's done it before so there's no reason why she shouldn't do it again."

"I don't believe it."

"I can't help that."

"But damn it, man, you've got to do something."

Nielson gripped Toler's shoulder.

"Hold it, Nigel," he said, "there's nothing else we can do here."

"All right—but I won't forget this."

Toler and Nielson turned and walked towards the door.

"Good day, gentlemen," said Henderson, rising to his feet.

Toler stopped and turned slowly. He bit his lip and walked slowly back to the desk.

"It doesn't matter what you think of me, Henderson," he said softly, "but there is Mu Tung Ho. What happens to the body?"

"She'll be given a decent burial."

"Yes, I know that. But when I knew her in Kowloon, she was a devout Buddhist. Could you do your best to see that she's given the proper rites. I'll foot the bill."

Henderson's face softened.

"I'll try, Mr. Toler," he said.

* * * *

When Toler opened the front door of his bungalow on his return from New Scotland Yard, a letter awaited him on the mat. He slit the envelope with his latch key and pulled out a single sheet of paper. He read it silently. His face grew pale.

"You'd better read this, Joe," he said.

There was no date, no address, and no signature, it read:

DEAR MR. TOLER,

The untimely end of Mu Tung Ho was unfortunate. You were very wrong, however, to assume that her death freed you of obligation to me.

At the present time I have as my guest a charming young lady with whom I believe you are acquainted. You will doubtless understand when I say that she will have to pay the price for your indiscretion. You should not have visited New Scotland Yard.

"What can we do, Joe?"

Nielson was smiling grimly. He folded the letter and slipped it into the breast pocket of his tunic.

"It's a damn' shame about young Angela if this means

what you think it means. But in any case this is just about the best thing that could have happened if you look at it in the right way."

"What do you mean? It's just plain horrible so far as I can see."

"Yes, I know that as well as you do, Nigel. But don't you see? Reismann has made just about the biggest bloomer he could have made. If he'd left Angela alone—I suppose he does mean Angela—he would have been in the clear indefinitely with any luck at all. Henderson thinks you're off your rocker. All you've said about Reismann is just the figment of a disordered imagination. If Reismann had been content to leave well alone the very mention of his name would have raised a laugh in any police station in London. That's obviously why he's been on to you ever since you saw him in Richmond. He has very nearly succeeded in establishing himself as a myth. Unfortunately he has made the mistake of misjudging Henderson's reaction to your story to-day. He was afraid that Henderson had believed you."

"But what can we do about it?"

"We've got to get this letter to Henderson as soon as we can. Then he's got to do something."

"But what about Angela?"

"You stay here and I'll go up alone."

"No, you can't do that. He'll find out somehow and we can't risk anything else happening to her."

"Sorry, Nigel, but I'm afraid we've got to take that chance. If we don't do anything she's probably as good as dead anyway. If we act now we may be able to find her in time. Don't worry too much, old chap. I'll see you later."

He opened the door and was gone.

* * * *

Nielson was about to enter New Scotland Yard when the sound of a car drawing up behind him caused him to stop and turn. It was a black police car. The door opened and Superintendent Henderson scrambled out. No surprise showed in his face when he saw Nielson.

"Nielson," he cried, "just the man I want to see. Come up to my room, will you?"

He pushed open the doors with his shoulder and led Nielson upstairs at a run. Without removing his coat he hurried into his office, threw his hat on to the desk, and spun round to face Nielson.

"Well, Nielson," he said triumphantly, "I think we're getting somewhere at last. But it seems too good to be true."

Nielson had not yet regained his breath.

"Why? What's happened?" he gasped.

"Reismann, of course."

"I thought you didn't believe he existed."

"I didn't believe Toler's story that he was in London. That's different."

"But why the excitement?"

"Here, look at this."

As he spoke Henderson unfastened his coat and drew a sheaf of papers from an inside pocket. He opened them out and handed them to Nielson. Attached to the top sheet was a passport photograph.

Nielson whistled.

"That could be Reismann ten years before I met him—if you take away the beard. What are these papers?"

Henderson was smiling broadly.

"Splendid! Splendid!" he cried. Then more soberly: "I'm flabbergasted at the brazenness of the devil though. In 1932 the gentleman you see there became a British citizen. . . . Gave his name as Carl Maria Reismann. . . . Born in Hamburg 1895. . . . Profession, Surgeon. . . . No record of his leaving the country since naturalization. . . . Too damned good to be true."

Nielson raised his eyebrows and pushed his cap to the back of his head.

"How on earth did you dig this one up?"

"I put out feelers everywhere where there was a ghost of a chance of finding anything out. The Passport Office rummaged through their immigration records and dug this out of the bag. As soon as I saw that photograph I thought he looked too mongoloid to be fully German. Devil of it is that when war broke out he was such a respected citizen that

they didn't even consider interning him. Now I feel we're getting somewhere."

Henderson snatched up the phone; then turning back to Nielson, put it down again.

"I say, Nielson, I'm sorry. I didn't ask you why you came here."

Nielson felt a trifle bemused. He made a wry face.

"Here," he said, "I think you'd better read this before you do anything about Reismann."

Henderson took the proffered note. He read it and clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"Sit down, Nielson, will you," he said. "We've got to think this one out."

The two men sat down, Nielson on a chair, Henderson on the corner of his desk.

"This is serious," Henderson went on. "I really believed that Miss Sansom had gone off with her boy friend."

"Can't say I blame you for that. Can't understand why she said she was going to see me."

"Neither can I."

"What about that chap who was found with the bullet in him?"

"He's still too weak to talk."

"Too bad. Still, that's rather a long shot, isn't it? What were you going to do about Reismann if you hadn't heard this about Miss Sansom?"

"Have him roped in, of course."

"You know where he is?"

"I think so. I rang up the B.M.A. from the Passport Office, and it seems that a Carl Maria Reismann practices in Hampstead."

"Ye gods. He's a cool customer, if it's the right chap."

"We'll have to take a chance on that. Are you quite sure you recognize the photograph?"

"Pretty sure. There is just one thing though." He frowned. "In Hong Kong he was known as Carl Mitsumu Reismann."

"That doesn't mean very much, Nielson. The Mitsumu might have been his own idea to impress the Japs if he was working for them, as we suspect."

"That could be so. What do we do now?"

Henderson ignored the question. He looked puzzled.

"You know, Nielson, this puts rather a different light on the case of the Chinese girl we fished out of the river. It's fairly obvious what Reismann implies in his note. Even so, I refuse to believe that she has had so much as a finger laid on her. Look, Nielson, quite frankly, do you believe that Toler is one hundred per cent sane?"

"Yes. I think so."

"You think so? What does that mean?"

"It means I'm absolutely sure."

"Fair enough. You know him better than I do. Even so it would take a load off my mind if he really were mad."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it would wash out a lot of inconsistencies in this case. In particular about that girl, the Chinese girl, or should I say woman? She must have been about thirty, I suppose. And then, what was Toler doing up in Yorkshire?"

"He'd been drugged. I saw the hypodermic marks on his arm."

"Could that account for it?"

"I think so. But I wish I could be sure."

"And so do I. Madness could account for it."

"But it doesn't. If you can spare a minute, though, I think I have an idea that may help you."

Henderson rose to his feet and drove his hands deep into his overcoat pockets. He sniffed thoughtfully and began pacing the room.

"O.K., Nielson. Make it snappy though, if you can."

"Right ho. Look at it this way. Toler knew that Reismann had ruined his career in the Air Force. He also knew that Reismann was in England. All this time Reismann was carrying on under the cloak of a respectable G.P. and in all probability regarded Toler as the biggest threat to his security. He could have killed Toler, but however skilfully it was done the murder would have been a big risk to take. As the only alternative he decided to do all in his power to make Toler seem mad. He fooled you anyway."

"Did he? . . . Yes he did."

"Sending Toler off to Yorkshire like that was just another

move to cast doubts on Toler's sanity. Unless, of course, we are to assume that he was intended to die of exposure. We'll never know about that. I should say he went under the influence of hypnotic suggestion, induced by some drug or other. Anyway, the point is this. If Toler can't explain what he was doing in Yorkshire, then there is, on the face of it, good reason for you not believing the rest of his story. Why, if Mu Tung Ho hadn't drowned herself, you would never have heard Toler's story at all."

Henderson stopped pacing and leaned against the wall.

"Aren't you forgetting one rather important question?"

"What?"

"Was the girl flogged or wasn't she? Before we know that, we can't possibly pass judgment on Toler's mental condition."

"What about the bruises on Toler's neck? They tie in with his description of that chair."

"That's so, but what happened to Toler really has very little connection with what happened to the girl. Anyway, we didn't see anything of that chair when we visited 'The Dragons'. But of course that doesn't mean a thing." He paused to look at his watch. "Afraid I can't stay here discussing Toler any longer. It's time I got moving."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to take a chance and arrest Reismann."

"But what about Miss Sansom?"

"Must risk that."

"Look here, Henderson, why not let me pay Reismann a visit first?"

"Why you?"

"Obvious, isn't it? With any luck he doesn't know that I'm connected with this case. If that's so there's no reason why I shouldn't visit him if I were in Hampstead and happened to see his nameplate. After all, he had nothing against me in Hong Kong; in fact he was positively affable with me. And another thing. If it so happens that this chap in Hampstead isn't the right Reismann, it might save you a lot of embarrassment if I went along first."

"I see what you mean, but it's a big risk for you to take. He might not be feeling sociable."

"I'm willing to take that chance if you'll let me do it."

Henderson thought for a moment.

"All right, Nielson—but watch your step. I'll get you a car and you can go up to-night."

"That's all right, I've got my own car downstairs."

"Then you'd better get off right away. If I don't hear from you by midnight I'm coming after you."

He offered Nielson his hand.

"Good luck," he said.

12

BUT for Toler there was no encouragement; no glimpse of a goal in sight. He sat alone, gazing out over the river as the shadows deepened amongst the poplars on the opposite bank. He remembered Mu Tung Ho and the manner of her death.

He lit a cigarette and tried to tear his mind away from the girl who was dead and the girl who was still alive. For Mu Tung Ho he felt a proud sorrow that was beyond emotional expression. But for Angela Sansom his feelings were akin to shame. He had taken her as a bodyguard to give himself a sense of security. She had obeyed him without question, and her reward had been a ticket to hell.

Then he remembered what Henderson had said. There were no marks on the body of Mu Tung Ho. No marks! Great God, there must be marks!

He rose to his feet and lit a second cigarette from the half-smoked stub of the first.

No marks. . . .

No marks. . . .

Had he imagined it? . . .

But he could not imagine screams like that. . . .

There would be blood on the carpet. . . .

Blood always left some trace. . . .

Blood on the floor beneath the hook. . . .

Henderson could find it. . . .

But Henderson thought he was mad. . . .

He hadn't said so.

But you could see it in his eyes. . . .

Mad! . . .

Mad? . . .

Could he be mad? . . .

As the darkness fell the rain began to fall again. That same monotonous peck, peck, peck at the windows as the

raindrops gathered to blur the last remaining seconds of daylight.

A couple, arm in arm, crunched by on the gravel, laughing in the rain. Could they imagine a thing like that? Or was he the only one who was mad?

Was it imagination? . . .

Could any man imagine things like that? . . .

The screams. . . .

The blood. . . .

Slowly trickling. . . .

Dripping. . . .

Down on to the carpet. . . .

The pure white Chinese carpet. . . .

Plain white, without any pattern. . . .

Except the blood. . . .

Red-black droplets. . . .

Down on to the carpet. . . .

A garish pattern on a pure white ground. . . .

The blood and the screams. . . .

A lone jet aircraft whistled its way smoothly across the blackening sky. A man, a boy, in love with speed and life and laughter, tearing his destiny from the sky. So young, yet close to death. What could he know of those whose lives were hate? Lucky young devil.

The devil himself. . . .

Reismann. . . .

Rocking back on his heels. . . .

Hideous, horrible laughter. . . .

Laughing while they flogged her. . . .

Could he imagine laughter such as that? . . .

No marks. . . .

There must be marks. . . .

Oh, God, there must be marks. . . .

Or was he mad? . . .

Mad. . . .

Mad. . . .

The blood. . . . And the shrieks of Mu Tung Ho. . . .

He opened the window and sent the stub of his cigarette spinning out into the night. The moon swam mistily above the naked poplars. The laughing couple stood at the water's edge, locked in each other's arms. Silent now. Lost

in the wonder of their lives, lost in their love. The hot sweet love of youth. Would they be torn apart by death or hate? God give them peace, and let them have their love.

He closed the window softly so that they would never know that they were not alone. He lit another cigarette and looked up to the moon. The moon of madness; or the moon of love.

Mu Tung Ho. . . .

Bowing among the cherry trees of Kowloon. . . .

Smiling her solemn welcome. . . .

Screaming her agony, swinging from the hook. . . .

And Angela. . . .

Beauty to set a man's heart on fire. . . .

Angela. . . .

Oh, God. . . .

Not Angela as well. . . .

Not Angela. . . .

No! . . .

Great God he must be mad. . . .

He had to be mad. . . .

There were no marks. . . .

No screams. . . .

No blood. . . .

And Henderson was right. . . .

He was mad. . . .

Mad. . . .

Then he dropped the smouldering cigarette into the hearth and straightened himself. It was almost dark now, but it was to him as though the sun was rising. He passed his hand over his eyes and smiled. A slight smile, but no less a smile. He had within his grasp the answer to it all.

Hypnotism!

Reismann had imposed his will upon him and charged his mind with horror, the seeds of which had been planted there by the fear in the eyes of Mu Tung Ho as she had fled from him that day in Wardour Street.

He experienced a strange, pathetic elation. Mu Tung Ho was dead. She had died for him. But she was dead because she wished to die. He did not pity her nor mourn

her; he knew of the equanimity with which the oriental mind could contemplate the end. For did they not believe that the end was but the beginning? The beginning of a paradise beyond the hell of life. They believed, with a sincerity which was beyond the capacity of modern, western, sophisticated man. She was safe now. Safe and at peace. There are far worse things than death.

And Angela too was safe. Reismann was playing a bluff that had already been called, although he did not yet realize that that was so. But the secret was out, and Angela was safe. For the first time in many years of doubt and anxiety, Toler bowed his head in prayer, and gave thanks.

Then he sat down on the divan and waited. His mind was clear and his hand was steady. Once again he could feel sure of himself. He no longer feared the menace of Doctor Reismann.

Joe would be back soon and then they could get started. Henderson would believe him now—and understand.

He lit yet another cigarette and lay back against the cushions. His mind was his own again. Reismann was beaten.

He stood up and stretched himself. He ruffled his hair vigorously and stepped across to the piano. He was about to sit down when the telephone rang. He switched on the lamp and pressed the receiver to his ear.

"Hello," he said, "Toler speaking."

"Ah, good evening, Mr. Toler. I trust you are well?"

Reismann.

"Well?" asked Toler flatly.

"I trust you are none the worse for your little trip?"

"Get to the point you blasted little Nazi."

"Mr. Toler, I would remind you that you cannot afford to be rude to me."

"Oh, indeed, and why not?"

"Remember Miss Sansom?"

"What about her?"

"You received my note?"

"Yes, and I sent it straight to Scotland Yard. So what?"

"Indeed. Mr. Toler, I would remind you of two things. I never lie—and I never make idle threats."

"Frankly, my dear Doctor, I don't believe that you are capable of telling the truth. You're nothing but a dirty, second-rate little half-breed. And you can go to hell! "

Toler crashed the telephone back into its stirrup and felt better than he had felt for months.

13

ANGELA lay in her bed and waited. She was in full possession of her senses now for the first time in endless, countless, nameless days, and hours and minutes. Her mind was clear again, but the hell of the past crowded in upon her and there was no promise for the future but that it would be still worse.

The blackness of the room closed in around her like an all-enveloping blanket, stifling and terrifying. There was silence except for the pounding of the blood in her ears. Each beat of her heart brought nearer the moment when Paula would come again to lead, or drag, or carry her back along that corridor. She tried to tell herself, over and over again, that she would never speak. Only with her silence could she buy for herself self-respect in the future; if there was a future. But she knew that now it was too late. She could not choke back the words any longer. She had taken as much as she could bring herself to take in silence.

She tried to hold her mind in check. Forced herself to think, think, think, and discover how long she had been there. But it was hopeless. She had no means of knowing. For days, or weeks there had been nothing but darkness and fear. Darkness which had taken unto itself almost tangible shape. Darkness interspersed with brief flashes of light: light scared with terror. Journeys to hell and back.

Then a new horror struck her mind. Paula had not asked her to tell, that last hideous time. She had not wanted her to speak. Or she had not cared. The woman had just wanted to break her, body and soul. She suddenly realized that nothing could save her while she was at Paula's mercy. Nothing she could say would make any difference. The Doctor wanted to know her secret, but his wife did not care. She just wanted to break her.

Her body throbbed, numb and swollen. Even her hands,

her feet, her eyes, her brain, all seemed distended and grotesquely bloated. She clutched the sides of the bed and waited, waited, waited, for Paula to return with that apostatic rosary rattling about her knees.

There was a sound. A click. A hand was on the door knob. It was turning. Turning slowly. A quiver ran through her. Her mind was paralysed. She must not speak. She must not speak. But she knew she would. She could stand no more of it. The door was opening. She could hear it rustling across the soft, deep pile of the carpet. She clenched her tongue between her teeth to hold back the rising screams.

Paula!

No. No. It wasn't Paula. It couldn't be Paula. The breathing was short and broken and laboured. Paula didn't breath like that. . . .

The light came on, but she did not open her eyes. She screwed them tightly shut. Keep out the truth and the future as long as she could. She sank her teeth deeper into her tongue until the pain almost drowned her terror. She no longer had the courage to meet the unknown face to face. She lay, stiff and trembling. Praying: God let me die! Oh, God, let me die!

A weak voice addressed her. But her mind was too dazed to believe what she heard.

And then again:

"Angy! Thank God I've found you."

Slowly she opened her eyes, but at first did not register what they saw. It couldn't be true. She put up her hands to her face and felt the hot tears flooding down her cheeks. It couldn't be.

"Angy. . . ."

But there he was. Leaning against the foot of the bed with a blanket wrapped round his shoulders, his face blue-white as slaked lime, stood Peter Vesey. He sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, breathing rapidly through his open mouth. He sagged forward taking his face in his hands. He swayed.

But for several moments she could not speak. Her lips were stiff and cracked. She could not force them to form the words.

"Angy. . . ." It was barely audible this time.

"Peter," she gasped at last. "How? . . ."

But it was a full minute, and more, before he moved. Slowly, painfully, he straightened himself. There were great black circles under his eyes and his skin seemed to have acquired a strange transparency. His lips moved and shaped themselves for several seconds before he managed to force out the words.

"Angy. . . . Thank . . . God I've found you. . . . Are you all . . . right?"

"Yes, I'm all right." The words tumbled from her lips as if they were spilling forth of their own accord. "But you, Peter, you're ill. How did you get here? I thought you escaped. What happened?"

"I . . . got a bullet in me. . . . In my chest. . . . Got to the car. . . . Thought they were coming after me. . . . But they didn't. . . . Got it going, and had just turned the corner. . . . Then fainted. . . . Where are we?"

"I don't know. How long have you been here?"

"Not very long . . . I think. . . . Came round in hospital. . . . It's got . . . Charing Cross Hospital on this . . . damned nightshirt. . . . There were nurses hovering round me . . . and a man sitting beside the bed. . . . Think he was a policeman. . . . Wanted to tell them what happened. . . . But they wouldn't let me . . . said I was too weak to talk. . . . Then all the lights went out. . . . Was a shocking scuffle. . . . Someone slugged the man sitting with me. . . . Then they stuck something in my arm. . . . When I came to I was here. . . . I think . . . I was kidnapped. . . ."

"Have you seen anyone here?"

"Old witch in black came in. . . . Said something about a doctor. . . . Didn't like it. . . . Went for a walk and found you. . . ."

"What day is it?" It didn't matter. She knew it wasn't important, but she had to know how long she had been in that hell.

"Hav . . . haven't a clue." He closed his eyes.

For a moment she thought he was going to faint. His breathing became even more uneven. He swayed and bit his lip. Then, with a magnificent effort of will, he straight-

ened himself. He coughed, a dry racking cough that seemed to shake his bones.

"Peter! Are you all right?"

"Yes. . . ."

"But you're ill. You've got to rest a while or you'll . . ."

"Never mind that," he interrupted valiantly. "We . . . we've got to get out of here. . . ."

"But how? Which way can we go? They're bound to be guarding the place."

"Can't . . . worry about that now. . . . We've got to try. . . . It seems to be quiet now. . . . Let's have a bash at it right away. . . ."

Then he fell into an attack of convulsive coughing. He sagged prostrate across the bed. For a long time he lay there without attempting to move.

"Oh, Peter. Peter," she murmured anxiously. She could not stop the hot tears from trickling down her face.

He shuddered and then, slowly and painfully, thrust himself upright. His face seemed to have taken on a yellow, parchment-like appearance.

"Come . . . on," he said.

"Peter . . . I can't! . . ."

"Why not?" He winced and bit his lip.

"My feet are fastened together. I couldn't even crawl."

"Blast! . . . I'll . . . I'll have to try to carry you. . . ."

"Don't be a fool, you'll kill yourself. You get away yourself and get some help. Please, Peter. Go now. Quickly."

"No. . . ."

"But you must. You must! "

"I'm done for if I stay here . . ." he whispered, "but I'm not going without you. . . . Come on. . . ."

"You can't do it, Peter. Don't be a fool. Don't try. Get away yourself while you can."

"I've got to have a bash. . . . Can't . . . leave you here. . . ."

He rose to his feet and swayed sickeningly. Then he turned back the bedclothes and smiled distantly.

"You look like a Varga girl," he murmured, but his voice was expressionless.

Suddenly aware of the transparency of her black chiffon pyjamas, she blushed in spite of her fears. But she looked at Peter and forgot about herself.

"Peter," she said urgently, "listen to me. Don't try to do it. Leave me here. I'll be all right. You get away now, while there's still time, while you can still walk. You won't possibly be able to make it with me. But you might get away by yourself. Don't you see, Peter? It's our only chance. If you can get away you can bring help. But if you try to take me with you you'll kill yourself. Peter! Listen to me."

"I'm not going without you," he gasped doggedly.

Dimly, in the back of her mind, she was trying to equate this man with the Peter Vesey she had known before. Trying to reconcile the silly, ham-fisted, idiotic bore, whose face she had dared to slap in the lounge of the Savoy, with this man before her now, showing more courage and determination than she had thought was within the compass of any man. It never occurred to her to realize that she, too, the empty-headed, selfish butterfly, had been able to summon up enough courage to go through hell in silence when it was demanded of her.

"Don't be a fool," she said desperately. "You can't help me. You've got to leave me here. You must. Go, Peter. Go now, while you can."

"I'm taking . . . you . . . with . . . me . . . or . . . I'm not . . . going . . . at . . . all. . . ."

He stooped and slid his arms under her slender body. He looked once into the green depths of her eyes, then tried to lift her. The breath rattled in his throat. An unhealthy flush rose up in his pallid cheeks. Then, with a gurggle, he collapsed face downwards on the bed.

Angela flung a coppery wave away from her eyes and clutched him by the shoulders. She tried to turn him on to his back but she had not sufficient strength. She suddenly realized how hopelessly weak she was. She lifted his head. The face was cold and bloodless. For one terrible moment she thought he was dead. Then to her joy she noticed a tiny pulse beating beneath the transparent skin of his temple.

Her tears flowed again, but they were no longer tears

of fear and self pity. Her thoughts were now only for him.

"Peter. Oh, Peter, for God's sake speak to me. Oh, Peter. . . ."

With an effort she pulled herself together. Her mind was racing. She couldn't leave him lying like that. He said he'd had a bullet in the lung. Something told her that she must do something. She had to help him to go on living. She couldn't leave him lying like that. Somehow she had to get him into the bed and try and make him warm. She had to do something.

Slowly she worked her manacled legs from under him, all the time holding him to stop him sliding to the floor. Carefully she swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her whole body seemed swollen and sore. Every moment had its own little quota of pain. At last she was able to rise to her feet, and she discovered that she could just manage to move her feet independently. Slowly and painfully, with the steel bands cutting into the skin over her ankle bones, she could edge her way along.

She shuffled close to him, wincing at every infinitesimal step, and pushed her hands up under his armpits. Somehow she had to heave him round and get his head up on to the pillows. Then she could cover him up and try to make him warm. She knew that if she couldn't find the strength to do it, he would die.

Desperately she tried to heave him up. She moved him slightly nearer the pillows. But she had to do better than that. She changed her grip on him and for a moment she thought she would be able to manage it. Then he started to slip downwards. His bare feet slid out over the carpet like two hideous, waxy, lifeless flippers. With one last supreme effort she managed to hold him for a second. But that was all she could do. She could feel him slipping from under her. He dropped heavily down on to the carpet with his arm twisted grotesquely under his head. She dropped on her knees beside him, sobbing.

Then she heard it. Voices. Footsteps coming nearer along the corridor. They were coming for her again.

"Peter! For God's sake, Peter. They're coming! "

She threw her arms about him as if to protect him and slowly she raised her head.

Through tear-flooded eyes she saw the solitary figure standing in the doorway. She tried to speak but her lips knew no words. A scream hovered in her throat. She mouthed incoherently.

14

FOR some moments Nielson stood on the damp, greasy pavement and watched a bus recede into the distance. He had decided to leave his car on the main road and finish his journey on foot. His headlights had told him that the road he was seeking was not properly surfaced, and in case of trouble, he had no desire to be bogged.

He made a face as he looked down at the cast-iron plaque on the wall at his side.

'Bienvenu Road, formerly Glubb Avenue.'

"The lesser of the two evils," he muttered to himself. Then as he set off in search of number 77 he wondered how the local inhabitants pronounced it. He smiled as several possibilities sprang to his mind.

The surface of the unpaved road deteriorated rapidly as he made his way along. He paused to look at the luminous dial of his watch. It was just seven o'clock; bleak, cold, and singularly dark; he could see only one street light burning ahead of him. Realizing, too late, that he was standing in a muddy puddle, he hurried on his way, and turned up the collar of his greatcoat against the biting wind. By the time he reached number 77 his feet were cold and damp.

The road was wide and the houses, big Victorian monstrosities, were set far apart as if shunning each other's company. The murmur of distant traffic was almost drowned by the soughing and rattling of the big plane trees which punctuated the crumbling brick walls.

Nielson examined, with the aid of his lighter, the discreet brass plate mounted on a high, stone-capped gatepost, which read:

C. M. Reismann, M.D., D.Sc., F.R.C.S.
Physician and Surgeon,

and remembered his own modest qualifications. It occurred

to him that it was strange that a man so amply qualified should hide his talents in this backwater.

Dimly, beside the house, he could make out the shape of a large modern garage, big enough to hold at least two cars. He was not sure whether that meant anything or not.

He made his way up the drive and climbed the six stone steps to the front door. He pressed the bell-push and waited. His feelings were more in keeping with a visit to the dentist. He wondered how anyone could imagine it was fun to be a detective.

"What is to be, will be," he muttered, and felt not the least reassured.

The door opened silently and a guttural voice spoke in the darkness of the hall.

"Yes?"

"My name is Nielson. Is Doctor Reismann at home?"

"Come."

Nielson stepped inside and heard the door close behind him. The lights flashed on. He found himself in the company of a tall, thick-set woman dressed in a long black gown. A rosary dangled from her belt, but he disliked the thinness of her lips.

"You vill vait please," she said, and vanished into a room which opened on the left side of the hall. A few moments later she returned.

"Ze Doktor vill see you. Come ziss vay please."

Nielson tucked his cap under his arm and entered a drably furnished room. The walls were covered with dirty wall-paper of nondescript floral design. On the floor lay a moth-eaten Persian carpet; a Hamadan of poor quality. There was a battered bookcase filled with dusty volumes, and a heavy oak desk. Two ancient horse-hair chairs stood in the middle of the floor. In the corner of the room was a small wash basin and a cabinet of instruments.

"Good evening, Doctor Reismann," said Nielson cheerfully, as he advanced with his hand outstretched. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Reismann rose to his feet and shook him by the hand.

"Not at all Mr. Nielson. . . . I beg your pardon. . . . Squadron Leader Nielson," he said smoothly. "You did say Nielson? Won't you sit down?"

"Yes, that's right. Nielson. N-I-E-L, my grandfather was a pedant: 'I' before 'E' and all that sort of thing." He scowled inwardly and sat down. He hadn't said that since he was at school. But Reismann missed the point of his quip; or failed to hear it.

"Did you make an appointment, Squadron Leader?" Reismann asked. As he spoke Nielson noticed that a fresh scar ran across his nose, another across his lips, which were cracked and swollen.

"No, Doctor," Nielson answered. "I was out this way yesterday afternoon and saw your nameplate, so I decided to drop in for a chat."

"Oh? Why?" asked Reismann, his face expressionless. Nielson felt uneasy.

"I had hoped that you would recognize me."

Reismann raised a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles to his eyes.

"I must say, Squadron Leader, that your face does seem rather familiar to me. Did you by any chance study at Heidelberg?"

"No such luck," he said, "I couldn't afford post-graduate work. I had to be satisfied with one degree. I graduated from Edinburgh."

"Edinburgh? Ah! That must be it."

"No. You weren't at Edinburgh in my time. Not so far as I remember anyway. Surely you remember, Doctor—Kowloon, just before the war."

Reismann shifted in his chair. He took off his spectacles and laid them down on his blotter. He seemed discomfited.

"You know Hong Kong? You were there just before the war?"

"Yes. I was Medical Officer at Kai Tak. You performed an emergency operation on a young airman called Nigel Toler. He was taken ill in a restaurant and you saved his life. Surely you remember that. You discussed the case with me afterwards."

"Ah, yes. I remember now. A most interesting case. It was fortunate that I was at hand, but most regrettable that I had to operate. At the time though there was no alternative. I trust the young man fully recovered?"

"Oh, yes. He made a splendid recovery. I'm afraid that he had to give up flying though."

"That is too bad. What a great pity. I believe, from what I remember, that he was rather a fine pilot."

"He was a test pilot."

"Really? I had no idea."

Nielson could have choked him for that remark. He had now completely regained his composure. He offered Nielson a cigarette which was refused.

"It was kind of you to look me up," he went on. "I often long for the days when I was able to travel. But I fear that those days are over for me."

"Tell me, Doctor, whatever keeps you staying out here in Hampstead? I would have thought that you would have been more at home in Harley Street."

"You flatter me, Squadron Leader. However, there is something in what you say. I have only a small practice and, quite frankly, it is of very little interest to me, particularly now that the government has reduced our profession to a branch of the Civil Service. I spend most of my time, and almost all of my small income, on research. Perhaps you would care to see my laboratory? I cannot spare you much time however."

"That's very good of you, Doctor."

"Not at all. Come this way, Squadron Leader."

Reismann rose to his feet and opened the door beside the bookcase. Nielson felt his scalp prickle as he followed. He wished that he had refused.

The same air of respectable poverty as pervaded the dingy consulting-room hung in the laboratory. Although, however, most of the apparatus appeared to be old and makeshift, the whole place seemed almost aseptically clean, and there were one or two items of equipment which must have cost many hundreds of pounds when they were new. On a bench at the side of the room a small ultra-violet lamp glowed coldly down on a quartz vial which contained a colourless fluid.

"Ah!" Reismann exclaimed, "I should have switched that off."

He stretched out his hands beneath the glowing tube and turned the small plastic switch. As he did so Nielson

stiffened. In a flash he realized that he had seen as much as he needed. He had to get out as quickly as he could. He looked at his watch. He realized that his hand was not quite steady.

"I'm awfully sorry, Doctor Reismann," he said, "I'd forgotten the time. I really must be going. I do hope you'll excuse me."

Reismann turned and looked at him steadily.

"Really, Squadron Leader?" he asked smoothly.

"Yes, I must hurry. It must have taken me longer to get here than I expected." He turned, suddenly feeling very clumsy, and went back into the consulting-room. The mud and the comforting blackness of Bienvenu Road seemed an impossible distance away.

"Did you come straight from Laleham?" said Reismann.

Nielson spun round, his hand gripping the corner of the decrepit old desk.

Reismann was smiling. In his hand was a large German automatic pistol.

"You must think I'm a fool, Squadron Leader. I am not; but you have proved conclusively that you yourself are one. But it no longer matters. I have no alternative but to kill you here and now."

Nielson's stomach turned over. His mind was racing. He knew he had no basis on which to build a bluff. His only hope was that somehow he might get close enough to Reismann to dash the gun from his hand. But the desk was between them.

"Really, Doctor," he said, knowing he was wasting his breath. "This is really quite beyond me. Would you mind explaining who you imagine I am?" His tongue felt too large for his mouth.

Reismann laughed.

"Do not be a fool, Squadron Leader. I know who you are as well as you know who I am. But tell me, before I shoot you, how you managed to find me."

"I told you. I saw your nameplate as I was passing."

"No, no. That will not do. This road is a cul-de-sac. I do not think you were . . . just passing. Tell me the truth, Squadron Leader, it cannot make any difference now."

Nielson lowered his head. His hand was less than an inch from the base of the desk lamp which supplied all the light in the room. He sighed.

"Very well. The Medical Register."

"Ha! That is amusing. To think that Mr. Toler has been worrying the police about me since 1940 and yet they never bothered to check whether there was a Doctor Reismann in England. I have been quite open, you know. I have occupied this house since just before the war began, and my plate has been on the gate all that time, and my address in the Medical Register. But your police are such fools; I knew I was quite safe. But I must apologize to you, Squadron Leader, you are very shrewd. How clever of you to find me."

"Don't flatter me, Reismann. It wasn't me who found you. It was Superintendent Henderson of New Scotland Yard."

Reismann looked startled.

"Yes, Reismann. The game's up. They know where you are."

"*Himmel!*"

He raised the automatic. Nielson found himself looking straight down the barrel; he tried to swallow, but his throat was dry.

At that moment a police whistle sounded close at hand. For a fraction of a second Reismann turned his head. Nielson's heart leapt. He grabbed the desk lamp and dashed it to the floor. The bulb burst with a sharp plok. The room was in darkness. Nielson dived sideways behind the desk. Crash! A bullet screamed across the room. Nielson hit the floor and gasped. He had fallen across the lamp and the base had smashed into his solar plexus. He rolled on the floor helplessly in pain. He heard Reismann run through the laboratory. There seemed to be pandemonium all around him.

Slowly he pulled himself up on to his feet. He took a deep breath and hurried into the laboratory. He turned on the lights. At the far side of the room a door stood open. He went cautiously round the large, apparatus-laden bench in the middle of the floor and looked into the doorway. A flight of stone steps led down into a cellar which

appeared to be in use as an apparatus store. He went cautiously down and looked around him. There was no sign of Reismann. Then he noticed that a bank of shelves loaded with laboratory glassware was standing out a little way from the wall. It was obvious. Nielson pulled at them and they swung smoothly towards him. He found himself looking into a comfortably furnished room with a large black-lacquered desk in the centre. Henderson was bending over the desk, studying some papers. Nielson was about to attract his attention when footsteps clattered on the steps behind him. He spun round. It was Inspector Cox carrying a revolver at the ready. He looked as happy with it as Neptune would be with a tommy gun.

"There you are, sir! You all right?"

At the sound of Cox's voice Henderson turned his head.

"Nielson! Thank God. I thought he'd taken you."

"Taken me?"

"He got away. There's a tunnel under the road to the house opposite. He got away in a car before we realized what was happening. We've got a couple of cars after him, but I'm afraid we were too late to hope to catch him. Did you see him?"

"Yes, I saw him. He tried to put a bullet in me and then came through this way."

"Hm. I didn't see that door. But this whole place is full of hidden doors. We didn't stand an earthly."

"Good thing you came though."

"Yes. I thought you were a bit too sure of yourself, so I timed the raid for fifteen minutes after you arrived. Good thing I did." He turned to Cox. "Oh, Cox, take a look down that passage, will you?"

"Right."

* * * *

The second door along the passage stood open. Cox looked in, opened his eyes very wide, and tipped his hat as though he had come to collect the rent.

"S'alright, Miss," he said reassuringly, "you're safe now."

The fear slowly melted from Angela's face as recognition dawned.

"Oh, thank God you've come. . . ."

"Who's the gent?" He indicated Peter.

"Peter Vesey, a friend of mine. He tried to rescue me."

"Who?"

"Never mind. You've got to get him back to hospital. He's been shot."

"Don't worry about that, Miss, we'll have you both out of here in next to no time."

"Did you get him?"

"Get who, Miss?"

"Reismann, of course."

"No. Just heard the Super say he got away. Hang on, Miss. Won't be a minute."

Cox hurried back to Reismann's office.

"Bit different from the place upstairs," Nielson was saying. "I had a feeling that the scruffiness was a bit overdone."

"Excuse me, sir," said Cox, "but I've found Miss Sansom and that Vesey bloke who was nabbed from Charing Cross Hospital to-night."

"Splendid. Go and order an ambulance and then come back here. Come on, Nielson."

They hurried off along the passage.

"Hello, Miss Sansom," said Nielson. "I'm glad to see you're quite safe."

Then he saw the steel fetters about her ankles.

"We'd better have a hack saw, Henderson."

"There's probably one in the garage upstairs. I'll go and see."

As Henderson left the room Nielson picked up the elaborate dressing-gown and draped it around her thinly clad shoulders.

"Is he all right, Joe?" she asked wanly.

"I'll tell you as soon as I've examined him."

She turned her head to look uncomprehendingly at Peter, lying beside her on the floor, and then back at Nielson.

"No. . . . I mean Nigel."

"Oh, yes. He's fine. He's been a bit worried about you though."

A ghost of a smile flickered about her lips. She laid her head gently against the edge of the bed and closed her eyes.

Nielson began to make a rapid examination of Peter Vesey. A few moments later Henderson and Cox returned. Cox was carrying a hack saw with which he immediately set to work on Angela's fetters.

"The ambulance is on its way," said Henderson. "How is he?"

"I think he'll pull through, if we can get him to hospital without delay."

Henderson frowned.

"I wish we could have been certain earlier that he was mixed up with this business," he said. Then to Angela: "Do you feel up to answering a few questions, Miss Sansom?"

Angela slowly opened her eyes and looked up at him distantly. She moistened her lips as if about to speak and then once more closed her eyes.

"She's all in," said Nielson. "I'd leave it till to-morrow if I were you. I don't think you'll get much sense out of her to-night."

"Ah well, it can't be helped," said Henderson. "Nearly finished, Cox?"

"Yes, sir. Just a minute, I'm nearly through."

"Have you found Miss Sansom's clothes?"

"There's some lady's clothes in the next room. They must be them."

A moment later Angela's ankles were freed of their fetters and Cox helped her to her feet. She stood there with her eyes half closed as though she had not slept for many days.

"Do you think you could manage to get dressed, Miss Sansom?" Henderson asked gently.

Her eyes flickered fully open for a moment but were strangely unintelligent.

"Yes," she said flatly.

At that moment the ambulance men arrived. As soon as they had gone, bearing Peter Vesey with them on a stretcher, Henderson said:

"Well we'll leave you to it, Miss Sansom then. If you get into difficulties, Inspector Cox will be out in the passage." He turned to the door. "Come on, Nielson, I want to show you something."

Cox made an embarrassed little grimace at the thought of being asked to help Angela into her undies, and followed his superior officer out of the room and closed the door behind him. A moment later he realized that, in his embarrassment, he had forgotten to supply Angela with her clothes. He hastened into the adjoining room to collect them.

Henderson led the way back into Reismann's study and took a large black notebook from the desk. He had been examining it when Nielson had appeared through the hidden door.

"We found this in the tunnel under the road," he said. "Reismann must have dropped it when he made a dash for it. Do you know anything about oriental languages? You were out East for a time weren't you?"

"Well, I can speak Chinese, and I can recognize it when I see it although I never managed to read a word of it. Can I see?"

Henderson handed him the book and for some moments he thumbed his way through the pages. A frown flickered across his brow.

"I don't think it's Chinese, in fact I'm sure it's not. I'm practically certain it's Jap. I don't think there's anything else it could be."

"How about Korean, or something like that?"

"I wouldn't know, but I should certainly plump for Jap myself."

"That's fine, but we won't know what it's all about until we've had it translated. Anyway it does seem to substantiate Reismann's Japanese background." He paused to dab his lips with a bright blue silk handkerchief. "Can you credit the nerve of the devil, living here all this time with his name on the gate, as bold as brass."

"What do we do now?" asked Nielson.

"Nothing until to-morrow, I think. In the meantime you, Toler, and Miss Sansom had better assume that you are in grave danger."

"I realize that, but why can't we do something to-night?"

"Because I say so. Sorry, Nielson. Didn't mean to lay down the law. As I see it we've got to be very cunning or we'll lose this gentleman altogether. To-morrow I'm going down to 'The Dragons of Kunming'. . . . It's being watched all the time, of course, so nothing much is likely to happen there that we won't know about. In the meantime we just disperse and hope we don't wake up dead to-morrow. . . . I'm seeing to it that you all get police protection for the time being. Actually though, I don't think you'll be in any great danger to-night. Reismann will probably be too concerned with his own comfort for a few hours at least. Where are you staying to-night?"

"At Laleham with Toler."

"Splendid. That'll save me a man. You can take one of my men with you when you leave, and he'll be relieved first thing in the morning. Now you go straight to Laleham and stay there. I'll let you know if anything happens of importance, or if I want you for anything. But I don't want you to come up to the Yard until we've got a definite line on Reismann."

"What about Miss Sansom?"

"I'll see she gets home right away. I don't think she's very much the worse for all this. In fact it might serve to cool her down a bit."

"I think it might be a good idea if I went along to have a look at her in the morning. She's probably suffering a bit from shock."

"Is there anything that you could do for her that her own doctor couldn't do?"

"I'd be very surprised if there was."

"Then shall we leave it to him. I'd much rather you and Toler stuck together for a little while. Then we can look after you both at once. And in any case, you're probably in most danger while you're moving about outside."

"Right ho then."

Henderson turned to go. As he did so Nielson suddenly remembered.

"Oh, Henderson," he said.

"Yes?"

"About that Chinese girl. I don't think Toler imagined that whipping after all!"

"Really? Why?" He rubbed his chin. "That's interesting, Nielson. But could you tell me about it later? The sooner you get away from here the happier I'll be."

"It'll keep. Good night, Henderson."

15

DETECTIVE-CONSTABLE JACKSON was a young man whose ambition was of the same majestic proportions as his vanity and his belief that womanhood was a commodity invented for his own special benefit. He had in fact already decided on how he would have Superintendent Henderson's office redecorated, as soon as the powers that be woke up and realized what an excellent man he was.

At that moment he was, however, far more concerned with the prospect of Miss Sansom realizing his excellence. He regarded it as a piece of remarkable luck that he should have been selected to drive her back to Maidenhead and keep watch over her until he was relieved.

When she had first got into the car she had seemed more dead than alive, but now after half an hour's drive she was undoubtedly not only alive but awake. But she wouldn't talk. Now and then she turned her head and looked at him dazedly and he assumed that her blank expression was due to his own devastating presence rather than to her recent harrowing experiences. He entertained her continuously with accounts of his daring exploits, safe in the knowledge that she had no means of knowing that most of them were fictitious. He had already decided that she would make a perfect wife for a dashing young Police Commander as soon as 'they' realized that he was much too good for the lowly post of Superintendent. Then it occurred to him that she would make a perfect Commissioner's Lady, for it was obvious to him that that was the only position that would really give him proper scope for his capabilities. A few miles farther along the road, however, he discarded this line of future activity. It would really be more in keeping with the exploits of a superlatively clever lone wolf style of operator to have her as his mistress. . . .

He was feeling distinctly elated with his future prospects as he swung the police car in through the gates of the big house on the outskirts of Maidenhead. She leaned heavily on his arm as she handed him her latch-key, but once inside the house she shook him off and walked slowly to the foot of the stairs.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"That's gratitude," he thought, without stopping to consider what else she could have been expected to do. He dropped his hat on to a chair and took up his position on the corner of the table.

At that moment the figure of an aged maidservant appeared from the back of the house. She ignored him.

"Why, Miss Angela!" she cried. "Where have you been?"

Angela stopped, and after a few moments' pause slowly turned to look down at the maid who stood at the foot of the stairs. Her eyes betrayed no sign of recognition. Her lips trembled and for a moment it seemed that she was going to weep. She straightened herself and said, very slowly:

"Edith. . . . Can I . . . can I have some hot milk up in my room please?"

Edith scowled primly.

"Oh, you are going to catch it when your poor mother comes in," she said. "Why, the poor lady has been worried hairless!"

"Where is Mummy?" She pressed her hand to her cheek.

"Gone to play bridge at the Vicarage. She didn't want to go but the Colonel" (Edith was always slow to catch up with her employer's promotions) "he said she ought to go because it would cheer her up a bit. She'll be back any minute now, I expect."

"And where's Daddy?"

"He had to stay up in London for something or other. He'll be back to-morrow or Friday. Proper furious he was at you going off like that, Miss Angela."

"I see. Can I have some hot milk, right away?"

She turned and continued her way upstairs.

Edith sniffed and turned to eye Jackson disapprovingly

up and down. Then she stuck her nose in the air and returned to her kitchen.

* * * *

When Mrs. Sansom entered her daughter's bedroom half an hour later, Angela was lying in bed with her head buried in her pillows. The bedside lamp was still burning.

"Well, Angela," said Mrs. Sansom sharply, "I hope that you are thoroughly ashamed of yourself."

Angela did not move.

"Angela! I think you are the very limit. I'm disgusted with you. One minute you tell me you're madly in love with one man and the next minute off you go with another. Angela! Angela! I demand an explanation this minute or you leave this house to-morrow. I've had enough of your nonsense and I'm not going to stand for it any longer. Is that clear?"

Angela turned her head slightly and brought one small hand up on to the pillow beside her face. On her forearm were a series of pin pricks. She had not noticed them before. At that moment they meant nothing to her.

"Peter Vesey's in hospital," she whispered. "He may not live."

"And I suppose you've been holding his hand all this time."

"Don't be beastly, Mummy, you don't understand." Tears were trickling down her cheeks.

Mrs. Sansom sat down on the edge of the bed and loosened the neck of her fur coat. Her normally gentle eyes were blazing.

"I think I understand perfectly, Angela," she snapped. "And how dare you accuse me of being beastly. Why you're . . . you're nothing but a nasty licentious little slut. I'm utterly ashamed of you."

"Oh, Mummy. . . . Please. . . . You don't understand." The tears were flowing freely now. "You don't understand. . . . Peter was shot. . . ."

"I'm hardly surprised at that. It's a wonder something such hasn't happened before this with the disgraceful company you keep. And in any case, whatever happened, you

could have let us know. Your father and I have been extremely worried. I still say that you should be thoroughly ashamed of yourself. You never give a thought to anyone but yourself. I've taken about as much from you as I can stand."

"You don't understand."

"And what, pray, don't I understand? I think the situation is quite clear."

"Mummy, I feel proud," Angela whispered. Her mind seemed to be clearing again. "I've done something fine. You can't take that away from me."

Mrs. Sansom rose slowly to her feet. There was no mistaking the note of sincerity in her daughter's voice.

Angela pulled back the bedclothes and drew up the back of her pyjama jacket.

Her mother paled.

"Oh, no!" she gasped, flinging her hand to her mouth. "Oh, my darling, what have they done to you? Who did it, darling? Tell me."

"Doctor Reismann, or rather his septic wife. The man Nigel was after. I told you about it, Mummy. I went back to 'The Dragons of Kunming' with Peter on Saturday night to try to find something that would help Nigel, and they kidnapped me. That was when Peter was shot. They kept me locked up and drugged me and tortured me. I almost went mad. Then to-night Peter tried to rescue me. He was wonderful. I was proud of him. But he was too weak to help me. Then the police rescued us both. I'd have died if they hadn't come. I couldn't have stood any more. I did my best, but I couldn't have stood any more. . . ."

"But why should they torture you?" Mrs. Sansom covered her eyes with her hand and bit her lip. "Oh! How could they do it to you? How could they?"

Angela turned over on to her back, her green eyes blazing proudly.

"But I didn't tell them anything. I didn't, Mummy. Honestly I didn't."

"But, darling, what could you possibly tell them? You've only known Nigel Toler for a few days."

Angela turned her head away. She had to tell it all. Then her conscience would be clear again.

"You remember Daddy sending me upstairs to get my nylons from his bag?"

"Yes. . . . You were a very long time."

"Yes, I know. I'd just found them and then I saw a secret report about Nazis still working in Germany. I was curious. I didn't mean any harm. But I read it. . . ."

"That was a dreadful thing to do. How could you do such a thing?"

"I was just curious. I felt awful about it afterwards. But it was too late then."

"But how could they know you knew about it?"

"I couldn't help it. Peter said that there weren't any Nazis any more. I said there were and told him I'd seen this report. I didn't tell him what was in it. But I think a waiter heard what I said. Then Reismann wanted to know. He said he'd find out if he had to break every bone in my body. But I didn't tell. . . ."

"I see." Mrs. Sansom frowned worriedly.

"Mummy! You won't tell Daddy, will you? Don't tell him. Please! He'd never trust me again if he found out. Please don't tell him. They tortured me for days but I didn't tell them. I didn't, Mummy, I didn't. I'll never tell anyone. . . . Ever. . . ."

Mrs. Sansom wrung her hands together indecisively and looked away.

"Very well then. I promise. I won't tell him."

"I didn't say anything! I didn't."

Mrs. Sansom gently stroked her daughter's hair.

"I believe you, my darling. It was a dreadful thing for you to do, but I think you've more than made up for it. I won't tell your father. I feel proud of you. Try to forgive me for the things I said. I didn't know." She smiled at her daughter through tear-dimmed eyes. "Now try to go to sleep and forget all about it. You're quite safe now."

She stooped to kiss her daughter's forehead and turned to go. She wanted to keep her tears to herself. But as she reached the door, Angela called after her:

"Mummy. Please don't leave me. . . . Not yet. . . . Please, Mummy. . . . I . . . I'm afraid. . . ."

16

SHORTLY before ten o'clock on Thursday morning—it was cold and bright and clear—a change began to creep over the streets and alleys around 'The Dragons of Kunming'. Men, clad in nondescript and unspectacular attire began to space themselves inconspicuously about the chosen area. Great care had been taken to render them commonplace; yet they were noticed and the necessary adjustments were made in the routines of the shady side of Soho. But the change was subtle and unnoticeable to the casual observer. Yet the change was real enough. The regular downbeat of life had been disturbed; the rhythm was broken. The harpies went about their business, but restrained their blatancy. The men who reaped but did not sow withdrew from their doorways to await a more propitious moment to ply their trades.

Two police cars swung in to the kerb. Superintendent Henderson alighted from the first to be followed immediately by Inspector Cox. They were joined by Inspector Harris and Sergeants Fanning and O'Hara from the second car. Together they made their way up the alley to the great circular door of 'The Dragons of Kunming'. All was quiet. Henderson stepped forward to jerk the ornate bell handle.

When there was no reply he turned to Cox.

"We'll have to break it in," he said.

"Did you notice anything as we came up the alley, sir?" asked Cox, ignoring his superior's remark.

"Yes, the name board has been taken down. I don't like it, but we can't worry about that now. Let's have a look at this door." He stepped up close and tapped it with his knuckles. "Brute force isn't going to help us here. I think it's steel. There's a rather fancy-looking lock in the centre here, but it may not be as cunning as it looks. Fanning, go

back to the car and ask Symonds to get on to the Yard. Tell him we need a locksmith, and you'd better see about an oxy-acetylene torch in case the locksmith can't do the trick."

"Very good, sir." The man turned away and walked back down the alley.

"What do you make of it, sir?" asked Inspector Harris. He was a thin, narrow-jawed man of fifty, whose eyes were sunk incredibly deep in their sockets. He wore the conventional raincoat and bowler hat of his calling.

"I don't know," answered Henderson, "but I have a nasty feeling that we might be wasting our time here."

A moment later Fanning reappeared accompanied by a creature so picturesque that Henderson could scarcely conceal a slight smile of amusement. It was an elderly Chinese who stood barely five feet high. He wore a black frock coat and striped trousers. Most of his patent-leather shoes were hidden beneath lavender spats. On his head was a tall silk hat of considerable antiquity and in his left hand he carried a pair of lavender gloves.

"This gent wants to see you, sir," announced Fanning. "Says it's important."

The Chinese took off his hat with his right hand. It was a slender, graceful hand. On the little finger he wore a narrow pointed silver case, elegantly engraved, to protect a long finger-nail—the badge of the high born of Cathay. He bowed graciously.

"Honourable sir," he said in a smooth cultured voice.

But he said no more. There was a sharp crack. The little man shuddered and rose grotesquely up on his toes. Then he crumpled to the ground. From the side of his smooth ivory face there protruded the bright blue tuft of an airgun dart.

Henderson looked up sharply in time to see a head vanish over the crest of the roof.

"After him, Cox!" he cried. Then he knelt down beside Harris, who was supporting the Chinaman's head.

"He's dead," said Harris unemotionally. "That dart must have been poisoned. Know who he is, sir?"

"Yes. He was the manager of this place. Funny, he didn't look a bit comic in his office. Struck me as being a

rather decent little soul. I suppose that we can now conclude that Reismann is really in a panic."

Harris wrapped his handkerchief round his hand and jerked the dart out of the sallow cheek. Its tip was coated with a black, gummy substance.

"Curare?" asked Harris.

"How the devil should I know?" snapped Henderson. "Don't be so confoundedly melodramatic. We'll find out what it is soon enough."

"Sorry, sir."

"Look," said Henderson more calmly, "the area round the wound is turning green. This is a new one on me."

He drew a beautiful Palimpore handkerchief from beneath his jacket and laid it gently over the dead man's face. He rose to his feet and turned to Fanning.

"Get an ambulance will you Fanning, please, and a doctor," he ordered.

Harris looked up from where he still knelt beside the corpse.

"What does it mean, sir?" he asked.

"I was just thinking about that myself. I think we can safely assume that, willingly or otherwise, the old chap was in with Reismann. Therefore we can assume that things had become too much for him and that he had decided to come and make a clean breast of it, or else, perhaps, he just wanted to give us some slight tip-off."

"We'll never know now."

"No. But you might take a look in his pockets. He might have a key to this door on him. That would save us a lot of trouble anyway."

* * * *

But no key had been found, and they had been forced to await the arrival of the locksmith. It was noon before the circular door rolled aside into its niche. The locksmith slipped his spectacles down from his forehead and snapped the fastenings of his tool bag with an air of triumph.

"There it is, Mr. 'Enderson," he said, "and a very

pretty job it is, if I might say so." With that he gave his hat a perfunctory tip and departed.

"Splendid," said Henderson. "Harris, you stay here with O'Hara. Fanning and Cox come with me. If I need any help I'll give two blasts on my whistle."

Cox raised his eyebrows in resignation. After his unsuccessful pursuit of the airgun assassin he was in no mood for high adventure. He thought of the lunch he seemed bound to miss and followed Henderson into the cylindrical porch.

A quick investigation revealed the concealed door in the side of the porch through which Angela had been carried the previous week-end. Having given instructions for it to be investigated, Henderson pushed aside the curtains which gave on to the reception hall. After a little groping by the light of their torches the entrance to the cloakroom was located and the lights were switched on. But the broad sweeping staircase descended into inky blackness. Cox started cautiously down the stairs, sweeping the darkness with his torch. When he got half-way down he stopped.

"Cor," he muttered. Then, at the top of his voice: "Hey, sir! Come and have a look at this."

Henderson leapt down the stairs and followed the beam of Cox's torch with his eyes.

"As you say Cox . . . Cor! "

The main room of 'The Dragons of Kunming' looked as though it had been hit with a bomb. Never in all his experience had Henderson seen such a display of wanton destruction. The circular wall was now but a torn and mangled mass of lath and plaster, behind which a rough brick wall could be seen. Tables and chairs had been reduced to matchwood. What remained of the ripped-up dance floor was inches deep in broken crockery and glass. Even the ceiling had been torn to ribbons.

"Hm," snorted Henderson.

"I don't like it, sir," whispered Cox.

"Neither do I, and I have a feeling that we're not intended to."

"But why should he want to wreck the place like this? I don't see how it could do him any good."

"There are two possible answers to that Cox, that I can think of. Firstly he may be even crazier than I think he is. In that case he might derive intense pleasure from destruction for its own sake. Secondly, and I think this is probably the better bet, he did it as a safety precaution."

"How d'you mean sir?"

"Look Cox, most of our clients get themselves caught because they forget something in the excitement. When Reismann had to move out of this place he didn't want to leave a trail. There may be no end of clues hidden in this very room, though I doubt it, and it's going to take us weeks to go through this mess properly. Therefore, if we do find anything here, the odds are that its value to us will have been reduced to a minimum. But then again there may be other possibilities that we haven't a clue about yet."

By this time Fanning had joined them. He pushed back his hat in amazement, but made no comment.

"Come on," said Henderson, "let's get moving."

By the light of their torches they picked their way through the wreckage and made straight for the room behind the dais, where Henderson had interviewed the Chinese manager on his previous visit.

Cox kicked open the door and felt for the light switch.

"Thank crípes for that," he exclaimed as the light came on.

The room had been stripped completely bare except for the heavy, old-fashioned safe which stood stolidly in the corner.

Henderson crossed the room and crouched down to examine the door of the safe. He turned the handle sharply and grunted to himself as the door swung open. For some moments he examined the empty interior.

"Come here Cox," he called.

"What is it, sir?"

"I think this thing has a false lining. I don't suppose for one minute that anything has been left, but we may as well take a look. Lend me the strength of your arm, and we may be able to get it out."

"Right sir, what shall I do?"

"You take that side and I'll take this. When I give the word, heave."

For some time they silently tugged at the lining of the safe. Nothing happened.

Cox pushed back his hat and wiped his perspiring brow. Then he crouched down again and pulled open the small drawer at the bottom of the safe.

"That's empty," said Henderson. "I looked there myself."

Cox shut the drawer gently and opened it again.

"Hear that, sir?" he cried. "That click?"

"By Jove, I see what you mean. Right. Leave the drawer open and we'll try again."

Again they pulled and the inside of the safe slid smoothly out on to the floor.

Henderson pushed the thin steel shell aside and shone his torch once more into the safe.

"Now we're getting somewhere," he said. "No bottom and a ladder leading down. No wonder they didn't take this thing with them. Down you go, Cox, and take a look around. If you find anything interesting, give me a call and I'll join you."

Cox took off his hat and laid it on top of the safe. Then he manœuvred himself feet first through the narrow opening and vanished from sight.

Henderson rose to his feet and began to examine the dirty ceiling. Then he turned to Fanning.

"Do you see what I see, Fanning?" he asked.

"Where, sir?"

"Up there in the ceiling."

"You mean that hole, sir?"

"Yes. If you look carefully you'll see that it's threaded on the inside."

"I see, but where does that get us?"

"Probably deeper and deeper into the mire." He pulled from his pocket a heavy steel hook. "I found this in the passage outside. Can you reach up and see if it fits that hole?"

"I'll try, sir."

Fanning stood on his toes and after several attempts succeeded in screwing the hook into place.

"That's splendid, Fanning. Take it out again will you. We must keep that."

As he slid the hook back into his pocket Cox's face reappeared inside the safe. Without a word he slid out on to the floor and rose to his feet. He was pale, and did not seem to be quite steady.

"I think I'm going to be sick," he announced unhappily.

"Well don't do it here," snapped Henderson. "What did you find down there?"

"It's horrible, sir. Six of them, all strung up. Don't look as though they've been dead for more than a few hours."

"Six what? Pull yourself together, man."

"Sorry, sir," he apologized. "Five of them look like chorus girls; got next to nothing on. The other one's dressed but her face has been scratched about something shocking. They're all strung up to an overhead pipe. There's a row of boxes that look as though they were kicked from under them when it was done."

"God!" gasped Henderson. "Looks as though they knew too much."

"They look horrible, sir," went on Cox. "They're all bound up with sticking plaster, and their faces are all green and blotchy."

"So's yours," snapped Henderson. "You stay here and pull yourself together while Fanning and I go down and have a look at this. . . . Come on, Fanning."

Cox sat on the top of the safe and, after a few moments began to feel better. One body could be bad enough, but six, when he wasn't expecting it, was more than he could take. Cox believed that Superintendents should be sealed up in their offices where they could not get into mischief. He was therefore delighted when Henderson climbed out of the safe looking just as bad as he himself felt.

Henderson dusted himself down and offered his cigarette-case to Cox and Fanning. They both accepted gratefully.

"Well," said Henderson, after taking two deep draws from his cigarette, "I've seen some pretty damnable things in my life, but I've never seen anything like that."

"I saw Belsen," said Fanning.

"It's the same sort of mentality that we're up against now," said Henderson. "This is some of the dregs from the same rotten business."

"What now?" asked Cox.

"I suggest we leave them as they are for a little while. I think we should have a few photographs before they're taken down. In the meantime I think we'll put the lining back in the safe and finish our look round."

Without being told, Sergeant Fanning picked up the thin steel lining and slid it into the safe until it clicked home.

Henderson said: "I suggest we go and take a look at the kitchens now. They're through the archway on the opposite side of the dais to this. When we've done that we'll go up and have some air. I need it, I don't know about you two."

Fanning opened the door and sniffed.

"I say! Can you smell something burning?"

"Yes, damn it," said Cox. He rushed through the door and down the passage to the curtained archway. He pulled aside the curtains and staggered back. The main room was a solid sea of flame. They dived back along the corridor, but as they reached the right-angle bend at the far end, thick clouds of smoke billowed up to meet them.

"Quick! Back in this room!" bellowed Henderson.

As they shut the door behind them in the hope of keeping out the smoke Cox said: "Now we know why they wrecked the place. The stuff will burn quicker broken up. I wonder if we were intended to be trapped?"

"No," said Henderson. "I think that's why the old Chinese came. He wanted to warn us, for some reason or other, and didn't bring a key so that we couldn't get in and stop the fire. He wanted the place to burn down, but didn't want any more people killed. That's my guess anyway."

The room was getting hotter. Cox was sweating freely. Thin wisps of smoke were already curling up under the door.

"But we're trapped in here," exclaimed Fanning. "We'll just be roasted alive."

"No we won't," said Henderson, "that cellar wasn't built

to murder chorus girls in; there's a way out through it. We just go out that way. Let's go."

But when they came to try to remove the lining from the safe it refused to budge. They tugged and heaved, but could do nothing more than rattle it.

"Look," said Cox, "we've got the drawer right out. Maybe it has to be in part of the way before it does the trick."

He straightened up and stepped back. As he did so his heart leapt sickeningly. Something crunched and flattened under his heel. He looked down. There lay the drawer, twisted and distorted. For a moment that seemed to last a year none of them spoke. One of the panels of the door blackened and charred through, flames began to lick into the room.

"We're trapped!" cried Fanning half hysterically. "We'll never get out now!"

"Hold on to yourself!" snapped Henderson. "We still have a chance. Here, both of you, lend a hand."

He sprang forward and began to heave at the safe.

"What are you doing?" cried Cox.

"Don't argue. Lend a hand. No one would bolt a safe as big as this to the floor. We just have to turn it over and we're free."

A great gout of flame shot hideously into the room, galvanizing them into action. Cox set his enormous shoulders to the edge of the safe. As his head began to swim with the heat and the smoke the safe began to lift.

"Heave!" croaked Henderson. "It's coming."

With one final, desperate heave, they did it. The safe crashed over on its side. Fanning lurched forward as the safe toppled over and he hurtled out of sight through the hole in the floor.

"You all right?" shouted Henderson above the roar of the fire.

"Yes, I think so," came Fanning's voice from the darkness below, weak and breathless. "I'm just winded."

"Down you go, Cox."

Ten seconds later they were down in the cellar among the horrible swinging bodies of the dead women.

"Come on. Quick!" ordered Henderson. "If we can get out quickly enough we may still be able to get these out."

But, as he spoke there was a crash above him. The roof had obviously fallen in. The thin floor above them creaked.

They dived for the door at the end of the cellar and were through it only just in time. The bodies danced hideously for a second and then dropped to the floor, smothered in an ocean of flame.

The three men raced along a dank subterranean passage and came, after about fifty yards, to a long steep flight of stone steps.

A few moments later they were out in the air, safe, but with nothing to show for their efforts.

* * * *

The following morning Henderson sat at his desk in New Scotland Yard, and tried to piece together the odd fragments of information he had collected on Doctor Reismann.

He had Toler's detailed testimony, corroborated, in part, by Nielson. He was now quite convinced that Reismann was every bit as dangerous as Toler had claimed, but at the same time he realized that Toler was not perhaps as stable as could be wished. There was always the worrying little Yorkshire episode which could be explained away either by ascribing it to drugs . . . or to insanity. Where Toler was concerned there was always that element of doubt. Henderson wanted to be certain.

And then there was Tilbury's murder. The talk he had had with Angela Sansom the previous afternoon had apparently solved that mystery. But she had lain in her bed apparently oblivious of her surroundings. The doctor had said that she was still under the influence of some drug which he could not identify. Its action on her seemed to be cyclical; sometimes she was normal, and sometimes she was not. There was no knowing how long it would take for its effect to wear off completely. Now and then she had been fully conscious, but for those rare moments, she had seemed paralysed with terror. She had answered all his

questions carefully, but in a semi-conscious monotone. He had seen the chamber where she had said that Sykes had been executed. There were traces of blood on the floor. But that did not make her story true. Her own mother thought she was a liar. Even so there were moments when he wondered whether she was as bad as her mother thought. He had seen strange things happen as the result of excessive mother love.

But what of Mu Tung Ho? Had she, or had she not, been flogged? If she hadn't, then Toler's whole testimony was practically useless. If she had been, then what had Reismann done to her afterwards? And where had she thrown herself into the river? He was quite sure it was suicide. Her body may have drifted several miles or only a short distance. She would have been a conspicuous figure and yet, so far as he knew, no one had seen her about the streets on the night of her death.

He thought for a long time but was forced to admit that he hadn't a single clue to Reismann's whereabouts or plans. He could do nothing but sit and think, and hope that Toler, Nielson and Angela were adequately protected. But the Commander was getting impatient, as was the Commissioner himself; they both wanted concrete results.

Henderson rose to his feet as the door opened to admit Nielson.

"Hello, Nielson," he said. "I thought I told you not to come here until I sent for you."

"Sorry, Henderson, but this is important. I thought you'd have sent for me yesterday, actually. Anyway, this won't keep any longer. I think you ought to know."

"Oh, I see. Sit down, won't you? How's Toler?"

"He's all right, I suppose, but he won't be himself until this business is cleared up. He's terribly cut up about Mu Tung Ho."

"Yes, I expect he is. What did you want to see me about?"

"Do you remember what I said last Wednesday night before I left Reismann's place?"

Henderson slapped his hand to his forehead.

"Oh, damn! I'm sorry, Nielson. So much has been

happening that I clean forgot about it. You mean about that whipping the Chinese girl was supposed to have had?"

"Yes."

"Well, what about it, Nielson?"

"Well, when I visited Reismann just before the raid, he took me into his laboratory. I was only there a few moments but I saw something that gave me an idea."

"What?"

"Well, you see Reismann has singularly beautiful hands. . . . They're completely flawless. When we went into the laboratory an ultra-violet lamp was burning and he had to put his hand under it to switch it off. Of course, it didn't take a second, but I distinctly saw the outline of a long scar on the back of his hand when the ultra-violet rays fell upon it. I could even see the stitch marks."

"I see what you're driving at, but it's a bit far-fetched, don't you think?"

"Yes, perhaps you're right. But I think we ought to go down to the mortuary and have a look at the body. I suppose they'll have a U.V. lamp down there."

"I think so, but if they haven't I can always get one brought along quick enough." He paused. "And if we find anything, what then?"

"Well, for one thing it will mean that Reismann has made one of the greatest discoveries ever made in the field of plastic surgery. . . ."

"Aren't you forgetting one rather important fact?" Henderson broke in. "You, Toler, and Miss Sansom, have all sworn that Reismann still bears the marks from Toler's attack with the candlestick the other week. If he can produce such rapid healing, why doesn't he try it on his own face? After all, you could have imagined what you saw in the laboratory."

"True. I'd thought of all that myself. All the same I don't think it would do any harm to check up, do you?"

"By all means. Another horror, more or less, won't make much difference."

"What do you mean?"

Briefly Henderson recounted what had happened at 'The Dragons of Kunming' the previous day.

"How ghastly," exclaimed Nielson, when he had finished. "I read about the fire, but it didn't mention 'The Dragons'."

"No, we kept that out of the papers. It wasn't difficult. A lot of other property went west as well."

"Look," said Nielson. "Why did he only kill six of the girls? I heard there were about a dozen in the cabaret."

"I've thought of that. So far as I can determine, these girls used to do their turn late in the evening, when everyone was a bit lit up. When they'd finished their song and dance they used to go out among the guests and pick up any snippets of information that might be going begging. . . . Everything was grist to Reismann's mill. Obviously when Reismann decided to cut and run, they knew too much to go on living."

"But why only six of them? And why only the girls? Surely the waiters were in it too."

"I think that only those six girls were in on it. The others were just doing an ordinary song-and-dance job. . . . They were safe. As for the waiters, I don't think they have any need to worry, so far as Reismann is concerned. You can always use a lot of men in a criminal organization, but women are always a risk. No big operator trusts a woman if he can help it."

"I see." Nielson lit a cigarette. He was too preoccupied to offer his case to Henderson. "I should have told you," he went on, "that Toler had a phone call from Reismann on Wednesday evening. Must have been just before the time I arrived at the house in Hampstead. He'd just come to the comforting conclusion that Reismann had hypnotized him, when the phone rang."

"What was it all about?"

"Nothing much. . . . Just said he didn't make idle threats."

"That's true anyway."

"Eh?"

"Well, I still don't know what to think about the Chinese girl, but Miss Sansom certainly got a whipping. . . . Oh,

it's all right. They didn't hurt her much. The gentle Frau Reismann was doing the job, and apparently enjoying herself, when a bell rang: she said she'd come back and finish the job later. I rather gather that your visit caused a timely interruption. And then our raid took place. If I'd waited for you to come back before raiding, we wouldn't have been able to save her from a second dose."

"Thank God for that, anyway."

"Another thing, Nielson. I'm completely in a fog as to what happened to Mu Tung Ho, but I found a hook at 'The Dragons of Kunming' that fits in quite well with Toler's description."

"In that case, I think the sooner we can get down to the mortuary the better."

"Yes. But before you go, I'd like you to look at this." He opened a drawer in his desk and produced a photograph. "This is a photo of the body of the manager of 'The Dragons of Kunming'. I can't let you see the body because they're doing an autopsy to determine the action of the poison on that dart. . . . It's something quite new to them. Here, take a look."

Nielson took the photograph from Henderson. He examined it for a moment. Then his mouth dropped open.

"Good God!" he exploded. "I know this old chap. He's Mu Pei! Mu Tung Ho's father. I saw him dozens of times in Hong Kong. No wonder he wanted to tip you off if he'd heard that Reismann had flogged his daughter and made her kill herself."

"Wonderful, Nielson. Wonderful. Let's get along down to that damned morgue. I'll give them a ring and tell them we're on our way."

* * * *

When Nielson and Henderson left the cold, gloomy precincts of the morgue, some forty minutes later, they had seen enough to believe that almost anything was possible of Doctor Reismann.

"Well," said Henderson, after pausing to fill his lungs with fresh air, "I think I've seen about as much as I

can stand on an empty stomach. Care to join me for lunch? "

"Afraid I can't. I'm going up to Hertfordshire this afternoon; my wife's expecting me. That is unless you have any objection."

"That's all right, Nielson. I'll have an eye kept on you, whether you like it or not, but be very careful. I feel that you and Toler and Miss Sansom are in very grave danger. Let me know when you get back, will you? "

THE time that Angela spent confined to her bed in the big house at Maidenhead was, at first, almost equally divided between periods of dull, imbecilic silence, and bouts of stark, shrieking terror. Her periods of normalcy were brief and transient. But gradually the dull green eyes brightened and the shrieks of terror calmed to a tremble of fear.

On the ninth day she seemed herself again and her clothes were laid out for her to dress. She spent that day quietly, but the following afternoon she went upstairs with her eyes shining and a spring in her step.

She sheathed her legs in the sheerest of the nylons that her father had brought back from the Continent, and slipped her feet into the toeless, high-heeled shoes of fine black suède. She rose to her feet and looked at herself in the long cheval mirror; pale, cool, beautiful. She smiled and, for a moment, the bouts of fear were forgotten; the memories of terror and pain slipped out of her mind. Within an hour she would be with Nigel.

Mrs. Sansom came into the room and stopped to admire her daughter standing before the mirror, sleek and lovely in the simple black dress; her hair a patrician crown, gleaming like a chestnut from a freshly opened burr.

"What a pity you know you're beautiful, Angela," she said.

Angela turned and smiled.

"Is it, Mummy?" she said.

"Perhaps it isn't, darling." Mrs. Sansom stepped forward and kissed her daughter lightly on the cheek. "Are you sure you should go out, my dear?"

"Don't worry, darling, I'll be all right. Anyway I must see Nigel." She paused. "I wish Daddy hadn't had to go back yesterday. I spoilt his leave, didn't I?"

"No, of course you didn't. Anyway you mustn't worry

about that now. Will Mr. Jackson be going with you?"

"Oh, you mean my bodyguard. I'm glad he's here, I don't like the other one, Wilkinson."

"That's only because he doesn't look at you as if you were a goddess. I'm afraid young Mr. Jackson is busily worshipping you. As if you hadn't noticed."

"You must call him Detective Jackson, not Mr. Jackson. He might be offended."

"He didn't seem offended when I asked him to lunch with us. He seems such a nice young man."

Angela laughed.

"Why, Mummy," she cried, "I do believe you've been vamping him. You ought to be ashamed of yourself at your age."

"Angela, don't be improper." With mock severity.

Angela stooped to pick up her ear-rings. She carefully clipped them in place before turning back to her mother.

"I must be going," she said eagerly. "I can't wait to see him."

"Have you heard about Peter Vesey?"

"I rang up the hospital this morning. He's doing fine."

"Why don't you go to see him?"

Angela turned away.

"I couldn't, Mother. You wouldn't understand. He was so wonderful. I just couldn't face him now after the way I treated him before."

Mrs. Sansom's brow furrowed. She thought for a moment. Then she said again: "Will Mr. Jackson be going with you?"

"Of course. He's going to drive me there."

"But he can't do that, darling. That's a police car."

"Of course he can. He can't do any other. He's got to protect me, and he can't do that unless he comes with me. And he can't hold me here against my will. Therefore he's bound to drive me there if I ask him."

"He could arrest you, I suppose."

"Oh, no, he couldn't, darling. He's in the Metropolitan Police, and he's outside his area. Anyway, I'd be very

surprised if I couldn't wrap that young gentleman round my little finger."

Mrs. Sansom sighed.

"Very well, dear," she said. "But you won't be late, darling, will you?"

"No, Mummy. I promise."

* * * *

She left Jackson at the front of Toler's bungalow and picked her way across the sodden lawn to the french windows which overlooked the river. She avoided the path; this was to be a surprise. Peering in she saw him sitting on the edge of the divan, listlessly flicking over the pages of a magazine. She smiled and tapped lightly on the window-pane.

He flinched and snapped his head round. His whole body quivered taut. Then as he recognized her he relaxed and smiled. He got up and opened the window.

"Angela," he said softly, "why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

There was welcome in his voice, but it was the welcome of friendship, nothing more. Her heart sank but she smiled.

"Let me in, you ass, it's cold out here."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Come in and sit down. I'm afraid you rather startled me."

He looked at her with a worried expression on his face as she slipped out of her fur coat, straightened her sleek black dress and seated herself on the divan.

He shut the window and sat down beside her. For a moment he said nothing, then looked up and took her hand in his. Her heart leapt as she felt the warmth of his touch.

"Angela," he said, "I don't know how you will ever be able to forgive me for getting you into this mess. I should never have taken you to that place. I'll never forgive myself for putting you in that devil's clutches just because I hadn't the courage to go alone."

She placed her hand gently on his shoulder

"There's nothing to forgive, Nigel. I went because I wanted to help you. You couldn't have stopped me."

"But I should have done. There was no reason on earth why I should have dragged you into this."

Angela gazed down at the toe which peeped through the front of her shoe.

"Nigel," she whispered, "was there anything you wouldn't have done for Mu Tung Ho?"

He released her hand and gripped the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb, covering his eyes with his palm. He shook his head.

"Well you see, Nigel . . . that's . . . that's the way I feel . . . about you."

He turned his head.

"I love you," she said.

"Please, Angela. . . . I . . ."

"It's all right, Nigel. I just wanted you to know, that's all."

For a long time they sat together in silence as the day slowly died and darkness shadowed the room.

It was Nigel who broke the silence with a low, toneless voice.

"Did he do anything to you?" he asked. "Did he hurt you?"

"No," she lied. "Nothing like that. He just kept me locked up, that's all."

"I didn't think he would, but I wasn't sure. He hypnotized me and made me think that he'd had her flogged. It all seemed so real and horrible. I went through hell. I didn't realize that I'd only imagined it until the night you were rescued. But she's safe now. . . . She's dead. . . ."

"Yes. I know. Mr. Henderson told me. I . . . I'm terribly sorry, Nigel. I wish I could make you forget."

"I don't want to forget. . . . Are you quite sure he didn't hurt you?"

"Yes. Quite sure," she lied again.

But to her it seemed to be scarcely a lie. She could not give the memory of Paula any more substance than a dream. The sleep of death was but a half-forgotten fantasy. She could not even recall the horror of those minutes she had spent strapped to that hideous bench in that cold concrete cell. But she knew that the fear and the pain would come

back to her, as it had done so often as she had lain in her bed.

"Yes. Quite sure," she repeated. "They didn't hurt me."

It was strange, before she had left her home that afternoon her feeling for him had been a gnawing physical hunger; a love which had sprung from below the heart. Yet now her body was calm, though her mind was drawn towards him. She wanted to take him in her arms and comfort him like a child.

The room grew darker.

"Nigel," she said at length, "are you going to keep your promise?"

"Promise?"

"You said you'd play for me. Play the thing you were playing the night we met. What do you call it?"

"It hasn't got a name."

"But it must have a name." She thought for a moment.

"Let's call it 'Nemesis'."

"'Nemesis'? Why 'Nemesis'?"

"I don't know, but I like the sound of it."

"Do you? I always thought that 'Nemesis' meant something to do with righteous downfall, or something such."

"Good heavens," she laughed softly, "does it really? Still, it's a lovely word. Let's call it that just the same. Please."

"Very well. 'Nemesis' it is."

He rose silently to his feet and drew the heavy curtains across the window. He switched on the small lamp which stood on the corner of the piano and, for a moment, he stood there, shielding his eyes from the sudden light, before sitting down at the keyboard. He flexed his fingers, and began to play.

A deep, sonorous chord, in a minor key, flowed up from the sound board, to be repeated again and again in a slow, yet compelling, rhythmic pattern. Then, from the bass, there sprang up, softly at first, a strangely syncopated cadenza, carrying upon its billowing flight a stately melody in the treble. Angela sank back against the cushions with half-closed eyes and let herself drift off before the flood of

music. It was the music of Xanadu; there was nothing in the world but beauty. She had almost lost awareness of her surroundings when a change crept over her. Memories grew gradually clearer; her breathing became shallow and rapid; her lips were trembling. The shadow of the sadistic face of Paula Reismann grew up before her and then swelled up into the third dimension. A bundle of chalk-white strips whistled through the air. She sat suddenly upright, choking back the screams which bubbled in her throat. For a moment the sight of Nigel's broad straight back gave her confidence, but the memories were closing in about her. She was cold and trembling. She could feel the cold salt sweat gathering on her lips. It seemed that her back was burning, but it was pain of the mind, not of the flesh. For a moment she thought she would faint if she did not scream.

Nigel stopped playing and rubbed the palms of his hands vigorously together. But she was not aware that the music had finished, or indeed that it had ever been.

He was about to turn round when he said something she did not catch. She realized, suddenly, that she did not want him to see her thus.

"Play some more, Nigel," she said, in a high-pitched, screwed-up voice. "That was wonderful. Go on, Nigel."

She could feel the hot tears trickling down her cheeks.

He said nothing, but began to play a Chopin Ballade.

Unsteadily she rose to her feet and silently picked up the bottle of rum and a glass from the side table. It was a new bottle, almost full. She almost fell as she turned to resume her seat. She sat down quickly.

Desperately she tore the cork from the bottle and tipped the spirit into the glass. Her icy hands were trembling violently; she prayed that she should make no sound. He must not see her like this, and know that she had lied, and guess perhaps that the horror of Mu Tung Ho was real. He'd go mad if he really knew. Mad, as Henderson had for so long thought he really was. She had to give him a chance, he must not see her like this and guess the truth.

She raised the tumbler in her trembling hand and pressed

it between her lips. The glass rattled against her teeth. Then she tossed back the rum, almost a tumbler full, in a single draught, and lay back, striving to control herself until it took its effect.

Gradually the alcohol drowned the rising screams and soothed her tortured mind. After a while she opened her eyes and looked at him. She did not listen to the music. She was lost in a passion as old as Eden. She wanted the lust that only can quieten lust. She waited for her lord and master to wreak his will upon her, and she was not afraid.

She poured some more rum.

* * * *

He played on without stopping until the backs of his hands were aching. Then he stopped and passed his hand across his eyes, wishing that it was a different woman who sat listening to him; a woman who would not have understood the Western intervals of his music. He reached forward and picked up the ebony cigarette-box and removed the lid.

"Cigarette, Angela?" he asked.

When she did not answer he rose to his feet and turned. He looked down at her and clenched his teeth. He felt the blood drain from his face.

She had taken the combs from her hair, and she lay on her back with her head in the midst of a coppery halo. She raised one nylon-clad knee so that her skirts slid back to reveal one taut suspender against the softer pink of her thigh. There was a hint of an erotogenic frill. From half-closed eyes she smiled her invitation.

"Come here, Nigel," she murmured. "Don't you want me?"

His face flushed with anger as she spoke. Violently he hurled the cigarette-box across the room to smash against the wall. Grabbing her roughly by the arm he dragged her to her feet.

"You licentious little beast!" he cried. "Have you no shred of common decency?"

He raised his hand as if to strike her, but seeming to

change his mind, he caught up her coat and forced it into her arms.

"Now get out! Get out and stay out! And for God's sake never come near me again!"

He dragged her to the front door, his face white with rage, and almost flung her out into the darkness. He went back to the divan and buried his head in its cushions, not noticing the upturned bottle gulping out its contents over the carpet.

* * * *

Out in the cold night air, she was sober in a matter of moments; the horror and the shame of what she had done swept over her. He could never forgive her. And he would never know what had happened to her. He would never understand.

But she was thankful that Jackson had not seen her ignominiously thrown out like that. He appeared a moment later.

"I'm going home," she said numbly; but at that moment she wished she had the courage of Mu Tung Ho so that she could throw herself into the river.

The journey back to Maidenhead was a vast hiatus of misery and self-condemnation. But she did not think. She no longer cared.

Then she suddenly became aware that she was almost home. How could she face her mother after this? There was her home before her. The light was on in her bedroom. Edith was turning down the beds. How could she face them. . . .

She stopped thinking.

The window of her room seemed to swell out in a burst of orange fire. And then went dark. A deafening explosion crashed around them. She felt the shock wave as Jackson swung the car in through the open gates.

"Christ!" he bellowed.

He slammed on the brakes and dived from the car. Angela was behind him, her mind a frozen blank.

She was at his side as he bounded up the steps and in through the front door, which must have been jerked open

by the blast. When they reached the centre of the hall they stopped. Mrs. Sansom was standing half-way down the stairs, white-faced and rigid.

"They threw a bomb," she murmured dazedly. "They killed Edith."

Angela clutched at Jackson's arm as the world began to spin about her.

WHEN Nielson left London to join his wife in Hertfordshire it seemed that every thread of evidence had been broken. The next move lay with Doctor Reismann, and there was no means of knowing what that move would be.

Nielson had waited for so long for this leave. For many months he had planned how he would spend his time. But now as he walked, arm in arm with his gay and lovely Louise, he found that he could not answer the laughter in her eyes. Six days in the meshes of hatred had built up a barrier to his love. The hours and the days clambered slowly by towards the moment of parting, but he could not shake the pall from his mind. Each ring of the telephone brought him to his feet, stiff and expressionless; each noise in the night laid an icy hand upon him. And now, on the last night of his leave, he had to face the party, in his honour, for the village notables.

He sat in the window-seat of the big, oak-raftered lounge of Straw Hall. Originally the house had been three separate cottages, thatched in Norfolk reed, on the edge of the village of Stoke Mitchley, in Hertfordshire. He had bought them in 1935 and had knocked them into one house to make the home he had always wanted. And he had filled it with the treasures he had collected on his travels about the world.

Having this home had meant that he had not been able to have his wife with him for much of his time; but they had both felt that it gave them a focus in life, and it had saved Louise from becoming just another Air Force wife.

The lounge was furnished in old English oak and big Knole settees. There were rugs from Tabriz and Kerman on the highly polished floor. A cabinet held Chinese ivories and Burmese jade. A table lamp was fashioned from a silver Egyptian hookah. There were coins and pottery from ancient Shushan and Ur of the Chaldees. Above the fireplace there hung a Damascus scimitar. But all these

counted as nothing beside Louise. She walked around amongst her guests, slender and graceful as a gazelle that has never known the fear of man, her golden hair streaming over her shoulders in great soft waves. He loved her more than he loved his life. But he hated her cocktail parties.

The dark-haired girl who sat beside him had just finished her fifth gin and orange. She was behaving as though she had just finished school and discovered that she could drink and make a fool of herself without risking a smacking when she got home.

"Isn't it lovely," she giggled. "I simply love these parties with masses and masses of people and masses and masses of drink. And all these wizard types too. Aren't you thrilled?"

Nielson winced and looked towards the Vicar who had just sneezed into a dry Martini.

Louise was in conversation with the hearty Mrs. Queechy-Duff, clad in tweeds and brogues and sensible woollen stockings, who at that moment banged down her glass on the piano and bellowed that by Jove she must spend a penny.

Lady Jones, the wife of the local knight, stood giggling at an American Colonel who looked acutely bored.

"Crikey," muttered Nielson under his breath, "Louise may think me a moron, but I'd rather have a quiet pint at the local."

The Vicar's wife approached at what could only be described as a canter.

"Yoo-hoo!" she cooed, "Squadron Leader Nielson! Telephone!"

Nielson thanked her and excused himself from the dark-haired child who was now halfway through her sixth drink.

Two minutes later he returned, looking grey and old.

"Louise," he called softly, "Louise."

His lovely wife came smilingly to his side.

"What is it, Joe?" she asked gaily. "Don't look so gloomy, darling."

"I've got to get back to Town."

"Oh, no! But, darling, can't you wait until the party's over?"

"I'm sorry, Louise."

"But why?"

He swallowed hard.

"It's Nigel. . . . He's dead."

* * * *

Nielson swung his car out into the night, thankful that the tank was almost half full; with luck he had enough petrol to take him into London. As soon as he cleared the hump-backed bridge at the end of the village, he drove his foot down against the floorboards and held the car to the crown of the road. It was beginning to rain and he cursed his headlights which seemed to make so little impression on the darkness.

His mind was still reeling from the shock of the news of Nigel's death; he had not yet begun to think. Henderson had asked him to go to London at once, and he was on his way.

He had driven along for several miles through the winding lanes, straggling beneath the dripping, naked trees, before the rising tension within him caused him to slide his foot on to the brake and stop the car at the side of the road. For some minutes he sat motionless in his seat, clutching the spokes of the steering wheel, his unseeing vision criss-crossed by the erratic sweeps of the screen wiper. The rain, and the drips from the trees, pattered listlessly on the roof of the car. He gazed out into the blackness beyond the yellow glow of his lights. Half his world had ceased to exist. Was it worth while to go on? He covered his face with his hands and cursed. A woman, or many a man, would have wept, but such relief had never been granted to Joseph Nielson; so he sat alone in the darkness beneath the trees and cursed. He cursed the god that had made him and preserved him while allowing Nigel Toler to die. And he cursed the police who had failed to protect his friend. Henderson had said that he too was to have protection, though he had seen no sign of it. But he knew he was only safe now because Reismann had not chosen to strike. And he no longer cared whether he was safe or not.

He fumbled for a cigarette and put it unsteadily between his lips. He pulled out the old duralumin lighter and

flicked up the cover. He was about to spin the flint wheel when he stopped and stiffened, his eyes fixed on a dim pin head of light reflected from his driving mirror. He turned his head and looked out through the rain-soaked rear window. There was no doubt about it. A car was parked scarcely a hundred yards behind him. It could be innocent enough. Before they were married he had often stopped the car for a while in a deserted lane when Louise was by his side. But he had never stopped just behind another car. He didn't like it at all. His first instinct was to start the engine and drive off as quickly as he could. But he changed his mind. He might escape, but apart from that it could do no good. It would be a purely negative triumph. His mind was calmer now and he wanted to do something positive.

He felt on the seat beside him where he had thrown his webbing belt with the holster and the Webley .45. It was comforting to feel the cold butt of the pistol in the palm of his hand. He broke it open and, with his finger-tip, checked that all six chambers were loaded. He snapped it shut and pulled his torch from the pigeon hole in the fascia board. He opened the door and stepped out into the road.

With his torch in his left hand and his revolver in his right, he walked back along the road. He had gone perhaps sixty or seventy yards when he heard the door of the other car open. A foot scraped on the gravel.

"Squadron Leader Nielson?" said a voice.

Nielson flashed on his torch. A police sergeant stood beside the car.

"Yes," said Nielson. "Who are you?"

"Sorry if I startled you, sir. I'm Sergeant Henfry, Hertfordshire County Constabulary."

"I see. What do you want?" Nielson felt ill at ease.

"We've been asked by Scotland Yard to keep an eye on you. It seems you may need our help."

Nielson was nettled. He detested interference in his affairs.

"When I need protection I'll ask for it," he snapped. "I suggest that you turn your car round and go back the way you came."

The man was blinking in the light of the torch. He was

tall and thin. He seemed rather young for his sergeant's stripes.

"Would you mind lowering your torch, sir," he said, "you're blinding me."

"Sorry," snapped Nielson, and swung the torch beam downwards. Then he stiffened. He had never seen a policeman in brown suède shoes before. He tightened his grip on the revolver and raised the barrel.

"Are you going back?" he asked.

"Sorry, sir, but I have my orders. I think it would be better if you left your car here and let me drive you to Scotland Yard."

"That's a big decision for you to make, Sergeant. Do all County Police have such freedom of movement? I was under the impression that you had to keep to your own area."

"I can only obey instructions, sir. You'll make things much easier for me if you just get into the car and let me drive you to the Yard."

"I bet it would. Or would it be better, I wonder, if you took me straight to Doctor Reismann?"

"Why, are you ill, sir?"

Nielson laughed drily. A genuine sergeant would surely have heard of Reismann by now.

"You think quickly, my friend, but you'll have to do better than that."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you? Well you're coming with me, and if you make one false move I'll blast a hole in you the size of a dinner plate. Now come this way and watch your step."

In the distance Nielson heard the sound of a car coming up the road towards them.

"Come on," he snapped, "get moving."

"I'm staying where I am." The man seemed quite unconcerned. "You can't get away with kidnapping a police officer, and you know it. My advice to you is to throw that gun in the ditch and come with me before this car comes up. If you do that I may decide to forget about this. If you don't, and you're seen holding me up at the point of a gun, then I'm afraid you've had it. Come along now, sir, be reasonable."

"You're a cool one, I must say, but I'm afraid you can't bluff me. Get moving or I'll shoot you."

The man did not move. Nielson pulled back the hammer of the revolver. But he could not bring himself to squeeze the trigger and shoot a man down in cold blood.

"Put that gun down, and don't be a fool, sir. I'm here to help you."

"I won't give you another chance. Get moving." But Nielson was unnerved by the man's courage. Could he be mistaken? This had to be settled before this car came up with them. Then a lie came to his mind that would serve as a shibboleth.

"You said you were from the Hertfordshire Constabulary?"

"Yes."

"That's strange. Stoke Mitchley is in Hertfordshire, but for some reason it comes under the aegis of the Buckinghamshire Police. And we're in Buckinghamshire now. I think . . ."

He got no further. 'Sergeant' Henfry dived his hand into his pocket and whipped out an automatic and fired from the hip. For the second time in two weeks Nielson knew what a bullet sounded like as it whistled past within inches of his head. As his own revolver crashed, he was blinded by a pair of powerful headlights. Henfry screamed and staggered sideways into the ditch. His automatic clattered on the road. A fresh squall of rain beat down across the roadway. The approaching car roared up towards them and stopped with a screech of brakes.

"You all right, Nielson?" cried a voice he recognized but could not place.

Nielson lowered his gun and breathed deeply. He had never shot a man before.

"Did you kill him?"

"I don't think so. I can hear him still."

Nielson slowly swung up his torch into the face of Inspector Kent, of the Hertfordshire Constabulary, whom he had known since childhood.

"Hello," he said limply.

"Good thing I got here," said Kent. "I thought he was following you but I had a puncture down the road."

"How did you come to be following me?"

"I've been asked by the Yard to see that you get there safely."

"That's what this bird said too. Good thing I didn't believe him."

"Hm. Well, as soon as we've seen to him, I suggest you come on with me. It would be safer. I'll arrange to have your car collected when I report this business."

"Thanks. I've just about had enough for one evening."

* * * *

The chimes and strokes of midnight had already rolled out from St. Stephen's tower when Nielson arrived at New Scotland Yard.

"Sorry about that business up in the country to night, Nielson," said Henderson. "You're damned lucky to be here. Good job you didn't kill that chap though. He'll save us no end of trouble. Now, at least, we won't have to go on with this next business."

"What do you mean, this next business?"

"Take a good hold on yourself," said Henderson, looking down at his blotter. "You'll probably want to punch my nose when I say this, but I want you to understand that what I have done was done only after very careful consideration of all the angles."

"Just what are you trying to say?"

"Well. . . ."

"Spit it out, man!"

"Toler is perfectly safe!"

Nielson flushed and sprang angrily to his feet.

"What the devil! . . ." For a moment his anger was more compelling than his sense of relief.

"Hold it, Nielson. Hear me out. We can't afford to consider people's feelings just at the moment. I'm sorry for having worried you but until we got this 'Henfry' bird, it seemed the only way."

Nielson clenched his teeth.

"This had better be good," he growled.

"Sit down, Nielson. . . . Please. I think you'll see my point."

"All right then." Nielson struggled with his feelings and sat down. "Go on."

"I'm sorry I had to be so brutal but I just couldn't afford a slip up. We've got to get Reismann under lock and key before he can do any more harm. Early to-night Angela Sansom persuaded her bodyguard to drive her down to Laleham. He shouldn't have done it, of course, but I suppose he couldn't resist her. What action I take against him remains to be seen. However, just before she got back home in the police car, the old maid went into her, that is, Angela's, bedroom. As soon as she switched on the light someone outside lobbed a bomb in through the window and the poor old soul was killed instantly. It's fairly obvious that it was intended for Miss Angela. Jackson, that's the chap who was guarding Miss Sansom, tried to get whoever threw the bomb, but although he actually saw the explosion, it took him too long to find out what had actually happened to do any good. Before long Reismann is going to have another crack at her. Or maybe you, or Toler. We've got to get him before that happens."

Nielson was still scowling.

"It's too bad about the maid," he said, "but why did you tell me that Toler was dead?"

"There seemed no alternative. You may not have realized it, but you were under police surveillance all the time you were in Stoke Mitchley. Even so, Reismann had his watch dogs out too. And your line may have been tapped too. I wanted to make quite sure that you made your departure in a realistic fashion."

"Come to the point."

"Right. To be quite frank, we had lost all trace of Reismann until we got hold of 'Henfry'. We didn't have a single line to follow. Somehow we had to get hold of one of his men. My theory was this. Reismann wants Toler out of the way, therefore, if Toler were to die a natural death, he would be delighted. Reismann, however, is nobody's fool. When Toler's death was announced he would naturally have wanted to find out if it was really true. Now the only way I know of proving that a person is dead is to see the *corpus delicti* and identify it."

"So you were going to pretend that Toler was dead in the

hope that one of his men would try to have a look at the body."

"That's right."

"It might have worked, I suppose."

"Fortunately, it won't have to be tried. You say that you only smashed 'Henfry's' shoulder, and the hospital say he can be questioned to-morrow. With any luck, we'll have Reismann in a matter of days."

"I hope you're right. Anything I can do?"

"You'll be wanted at 'Henfry's' trial. At least we can put him away for attempted murder and half a dozen other things. In the meantime though, I suggest you go and get some sleep and try to forgive me for upsetting you. I do hope, though, that you realize how justified I was."

"That's all right, Henderson. Forget it."

"I'll let you know when we get him."

19

It did not take Henderson very long to find out that 'Sergeant Henfry' was in actual fact Gerard McDuff Sanderson, educated at a famous public school and Oxford University. He had deserted from the army in 1943.

Henderson spent many hours skilfully questioning him, but he refused to say anything of value or interest. In a way Henderson was pleased that he had refused to talk. It made his task much more difficult, but he had never liked to hear a man betray his fellows; he preferred honour to dishonour, even among thieves.

Sanderson had been prepared to discuss only one thing: why he had deserted. Henderson read and re-read the transcript of the notes taken at this stage of the interviews. It made him think. He read it again:

I joined the army because I wanted to fight. I didn't really know what I was fighting for, and I didn't really care. Older men may join up because they're patriotic, but a lot of nonsense is talked about the motives of boys when they go off to fight. Most of them just want to fight, that's all. And, of course, they feel like heroes strutting about in fancy uniforms.

After a while I began to think. So far as I could make out, although Russia was theoretically on our side, she was far more of a menace than Germany because Communism was international whereas Nazi-ism was national. I didn't want any part in a war that was going to help Communism spread, so I ducked out.

As a deserter, without papers, I had to live as best I could. I did a spot of house-breaking. I didn't like it, but there was nothing else I could do. Then I met up with Reismann in 1946. He seemed to have the right idea. It was nearly two years before I found out just how rotten he was, but it was too late to get out of it then.

I suppose I was a coward, but I didn't want a knife in my guts.

I think he's just as bad as you do, but I'm not going to sell out on him. Whatever else I may be, I'm not a squealer. He's a rotter but some of his ideas are right.

That's all I've got to say, Superintendent, so you might as well go away and stop wasting your time.

And that was all that Henderson could get out of him.

Henderson slapped the papers down on his desk and walked across to the window. How could a man with Sanderson's education be such a fool? Had he never heard of expediency? Surely it was better to win any war than to lose it. Henderson knew that during the war a lot of people had believed that anyone who opposed Germany glowed with perfection and righteousness. Now Germany was no longer a danger there was the risk that the man in the street would cheer on anything that opposed Russia. . . . The new *bête noire*. But Nazi-ism! Why in the name of all that was wonderful couldn't people keep a sense of proportion?

Henderson went back to his desk and tried to think; tried to conjure up some new angle from the worry-worn ruts of his brain.

Sanderson's clothes had told Henderson a little more than the man himself had done. He had worn a good imitation of a police tunic, but the trousers had been part of a dark business suit—probably bought during the war as there were no turn-ups on the trousers. In one of the pockets was a mess of old bus tickets, all issued since the raid on 'The Dragons of Kunming', and all bearing the numbers of bus routes which ran through Putney.

In the absence of any other information, Henderson had concentrated his attention on that area. Rumours had been followed up and houses had been searched. But nothing had so far been discovered. Certainly, several people had claimed to have seen a strange-looking man driving a car about in that general area. But that meant nothing. Nothing at all.

Detective Jackson was still liable to feel his ears grow pink whenever he thought of the interview he had had with Henderson on the morning after that drive to Laleham with Angela Sansom. And there were times when he harboured the most ungentlemanly thoughts concerning what could best be done with that young lady.

However, he had to admit that, on a cold and windy morning in the first week of March, the uninspired architecture of Putney looked far better from behind the upturned collar of a civilian overcoat than it would have done from beneath a constable's helmet. He could so easily have been pounding a beat again.

As he turned a street corner and met the full blast of the wind, he noticed that a small knot of people had gathered around a car parked about twenty yards away. A fish queue had moved over to the edge of the pavement so that it should not miss any of the excitement. Jackson hurried forward but decided to lurk on the fringe of the crowd when he noticed a uniformed constable approaching.

"Right-oh, now," called the constable, "clear away please."

A rotund little man in a black homberg hat and an expensive black overcoat stepped nervously forward.

"It was an accident, officer," he stammered. "I didn't see her. Couldn't possibly have missed her. I think she'll be all right."

"Don't get excited, sir. Let me have a look at her first."

The constable knelt down beside the still small figure that lay on the edge of the pavement, covered with a rain-coat. It was a girl, perhaps twelve years old. He turned back the coat and gave a surprised grunt. The left hand was neatly bandaged and the right leg was bound to an improvised splint.

"Quite a job," he said. "Who did it?"

"The doctor," said a woman from the fish queue.

Jackson pricked up his ears.

"What doctor?" asked the constable. "Where is he now?"

"Buzzed 'orf when 'e saw you coming."

The policeman rose to his feet and frowned.

"Anyone know who he was?" he asked.

A weedy little man pushed his way to the front and said grudgingly: "Looked like a chink to me."

"Eh?" said the constable. "What did you say?"

"Looked like a chink. Had a dirty great scar on 'is kisser."

Jackson's heart leapt. He pushed his way through the crowd brandishing his warrant card.

"All right, Constable," he said. "I'll take this man along with me."

* * * *

The weedy little man, who had given his name as Aloysius Gubbins (call me Alf), smirked at Superintendent Henderson across the table in the charge room of Putney Police Station.

"Like I sez, Guv, 'e was a chink."

Henderson pushed a reconstructed photograph of Reismann across the table; the beard of the early 1930's had been retouched away and both Toler and Angela Sansom had assured him that the likeness was fair.

"Ever seen this chap before?" he asked.

"Could be 'im, Guv, 'cept, like I sez, 'e 'ad a dirty great scar across 'is kisser."

"I see."

Henderson thought for a while. It seemed strange that Reismann should play the good Samaritan. But then, if he fancied himself as the saviour of humanity, albeit through the dubious agency of National Socialism, it was reasonable enough.

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a photograph of Mu Tung Ho, taken from her body and restored to 'life'. Then he looked at Alf.

"You say you sell newspapers?"

"That's right, Guv."

"So you're out in the streets most of the day?"

"Yes, Guv, that's right."

"So you see a lot of people who live around here?"

"S'pose I do. Don't notice most of them though."

"But you'd notice anyone unusual."

"S'pose I would."

"Then tell me: Have you ever seen this girl round here?" He slid the photograph across the table. As Gubbins examined it his ears turned a shade pinker.

"Well?"

"Might 'ave done. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Nuthin', Guv. I might 'ave seen 'er, that's all."

"A lot of Chinese pass you then?"

"Wouldn't say that."

"Look here, Gubbins," said Henderson, rising to his feet, "you're holding something back and I want to know what it is. Come on, man. What is it?"

"Nuthin', Guv. Honest."

"What is it, man?"

"Nuthin' I tell yer. Just made me think o' somethin' that's all."

"What? I want to know."

"Nothin' to do with this geezer, Guv, honest."

Aloysius Gubbins was looking acutely uncomfortable. His ears glowed guiltily. He looked anxiously towards the door.

"Look, Gubbins," said Henderson firmly, "do you know what happens to people who withhold information from the police?"

"Aw, Guv, it ain't nuthin' like that."

"I won't give you another chance, Gubbins. What is it?"

Gubbins reddened and treated Henderson to a patronizing grin.

"Well, Guv," he mumbled, "you know 'ow it is. You're a man o' the world, same as me. I was in the Merchant Service before the war, Guv. Able Seaman, that's me. 'Ad to give it up on account o' me wind, just before the war."

Henderson made a disbelieving face.

"An', anyvay, Guv, I just kind o' remembered that there's nuthin' like a bit o' chink skirt when a man feels lonely. That's all, Guv. Honest it is."

"I don't believe you. If you don't spill the beans in ten

seconds," Henderson bluffed, "I'm going to do something about it."

"Aw, Guv."

"I'm waiting, Gubbins."

"Well, Guv, it was like this. Like I sez, I like a bit o' chink skirt. Must 'ave bin just after last Christmas I sees this bit o' stuff," he tapped the photograph with one dirty nail, "smashin' bit o' crumpet, she was. Seed 'er walkin' along 'ere in Putney. Saw 'er twice, I did. . . ."

"Go on."

"Aw, Guv, 'ave a 'eart."

"Go on."

"Aw, Guv."

"Go on, blast you."

"Awright then. Well it was like this 'ere. I sez to meself, you're just my cuppa tea, an' the second time I sees 'er I follers 'er 'ome. Well, I suppose that's where she lived. Went up to 'er I did an' sez, all polite like, good evenin', an' she just turns round and slaps me in the kisser. . . ."

"Go on."

"Aw, Guv."

"I'm waiting. Go on."

"Well, nuthin', Guv. 'Cept if a copper 'adn't come round the corner I'd 'ave slapped 'er back. Treat 'em rough, I sez, you know. Anyway I sees the copper so I buzz off, quick like."

"You dirty little swine."

"'Ave a 'eart, Guv. You're a man o' the world, same as me."

Henderson resisted the temptation to punch his nose and said: "Did you ever see her again?"

"Nar, Guv."

"Ever see anyone else go into the house?"

"Can't say as 'ow I did."

"Not this doctor you saw this morning?"

"Can't say as 'ow I remember. All I was keen on seein' was the skirt."

"You didn't see anyone else at all?"

"Might 'ave done. Don't remember."

"Can you show me where this house is then?"

"Course I can. Why?"

"Never mind why."

* * * *

The following morning Henderson was feeling far from happy. He had always had a rooted objection to searching other people's property, even when he felt sure of finding what he was after. This was just a shot in the dark; he could foresee a lot of embarrassment for all concerned. The search warrant, which had taken him so much trouble to obtain, in the pocket of his coat did nothing to cheer him up.

The house occupied the centre of a red brick terrace which had been erected at the turn of the century. The front of each house was graced with a tiny garden barely big enough to support the hedges of unhealthy golden privet which ran from one end of the street to the other. The back gardens were somewhat larger and gave on to a cleanly swept but narrow entry. The general atmosphere was one of decaying gentility; each house seemed to resent the close proximity of its neighbour, and each seemed to be proudly ignoring the gap which had been torn in their ranks by a bomb almost ten years ago.

Secure in the knowledge that the ends of the street and the back of the house were being guarded, Henderson walked up to the front door with Cox at his side and rang the bell. The house, he had been informed, was occupied by an elderly spinster who seldom went out. She received little mail, and although she had a telephone she apparently used it only to obtain the correct time, morning and evening. It seemed that she mistrusted the talking clock and could not be persuaded to dial TIM; she always demanded her information from the exchange supervisor.

After Henderson had rung the bell three times the door opened to reveal a faded little woman in an old-fashioned dress of dark blue velvet.

"Good morning," she said.

Henderson raised his hat and began to wish that he had attached less importance to Gubbins' love story.

"Good morning, Madam," he said, and cleared his

throat, "I am Superintendent Henderson of New Scotland Yard, and this is Inspector Cox."

Cox tipped his hat.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," Henderson went on, "but would you mind if I asked you a few questions?"

She looked up at him quickly and gave a nervous little smile.

"Well, I really don't know how I could help you I'm sure. But won't you come in?"

She led the way into a musty sitting-room and waved them to the sofa. Cox laid his hat on the floor beside him and coughed. Henderson pulled out a vividly patterned handkerchief and dabbed his lips.

"What a pretty hanky," said the little woman.

Cox stifled a grin, and for a second he appeared to be on the verge of choking.

Henderson quickly tucked the handkerchief out of sight and cleared his throat again.

"Miss Hawkins," he said. "You are Miss Hawkins?"

"Oh, yes." She seemed nervous.

"Miss Hawkins, this must seem very strange to you, but I must ask you to co-operate with me. I have received information, during the course of an investigation I am conducting, that certain people whom I wish to interview have been seen entering this house. I realize that this is most unlikely but you will understand that I cannot ignore any information of this nature. I wonder if you would object to my taking a quick look round, just as a matter of routine, of course. I have a search warrant if you would like to see it. I do hope this won't inconvenience you."

"Oh," said Miss Hawkins, "I'm sure I don't know what to say. I wouldn't mind, only it's my lady boarder."

"Lady boarder?"

"You see she isn't well."

"I'm sorry, Miss Hawkins, but I'm afraid I must insist. But I shan't disturb the lady if I can help it."

"Very well then," she said, "but I can't imagine what you expect to find."

Henderson was inclined to agree with the lady but followed her silently from room to room. Last of all they

reached the room of the 'lady boarder'. Miss Hawkins paused with her hand on the knob.

"Must we disturb her?" she asked. "You can see that I have nothing to hide and she isn't at all well."

"I'm afraid so, Miss Hawkins, but I only want to have a quick glance inside. May I?"

"Very well."

She opened the door and Henderson followed her into the room. It was a large room but the vast brass bedstead seemed to occupy it completely. A stout woman lay in the bed, flat on her back. She was using no pillows and the counterpane was drawn up to her chin. One hand lay outside the covers and beside it lay a rosary.

Henderson stepped quietly to the bedside.

"Excuse me," he said, "I hope I haven't disturbed you." But he did not move away. If it had not been for the eyes he would have sworn that he was looking down at a dead body. On impulse he grasped the hand. It was cold and seemed quite lifeless. His spine prickled between his shoulders. He pinched the cold flesh sharply. The eyes remained expressionless; the woman did not move.

"Excuse me," he said again, turned and followed Miss Hawkins down the stairs.

"Miss Hawkins," he said, "do you realize that your guest is paralysed?"

Miss Hawkins let out a little gasp of dismay, and fainted.

* * * *

Back in his office Henderson turned over in his mind the events of that morning. Miss Hawkins had been very distressed but had done her best to tell her story as clearly as she could.

She had been troubled with rheumatism for some time and just before Christmas she had decided to live on the ground floor of her house and let the upper floor as a flatlet. She had put an advertisement in the local paper and it had been answered by a young man whom she identified from a photograph as Sanderson alias Henfry. He said he wanted the accommodation for a friend and his wife who merely

required an economical *pied à terre* in London; they were coming over from the Continent to tour the British Isles.

Henderson checked the date of this and found that it had occurred three days after 'The Dragons of Kunming' had been visited by the police and warned about the nudity of the cabaret. It was obvious that Reismann had reached the conclusion that his spell of luck might almost be over, and that the visit from the police had unnerved him. Miss Hawkins was so quiet and cut off from the world that her house had seemed a perfect emergency refuge.

At first Miss Hawkins had seen very little of her guests, who told her their name was Boronowski. They had spent only a night or two there each week, and on these occasions had cooked their food on a gas ring in their sitting-room, which had originally been the back bedroom. They had only been visited twice, by a Chinese girl who had only stayed a few minutes on each occasion.

So she had only seen the Chinese girl twice?

She couldn't be quite sure of that. About a fortnight ago, Mr. Boronowski had carried in a girl whom he said had had too much to drink at a party. She had not seen her face but she thought it might have been the Chinese girl. Two days later the girl had gone, but when she went Miss Hawkins could not say.

Miss Hawkins could not be more detailed because she seldom went upstairs.

After that the Boronowskis had spent almost all their time there, so far as she knew. Two days ago Mrs Boronowski had fallen on the stairs and her husband had put her to bed. He had then gone out saying that his wife had strained herself but would be all right after a few days' rest. She had not seen him since, and she had no idea that Mrs Boronowski was really ill until Henderson had told her; she had not been upstairs for a week because of her rheumatism.

It all fitted, so far as it went, but Henderson realized that there were a lot of holes in Miss Hawkins' story that he would probably never be able to fill in.

He sighed. The telephone rang.

Henderson felt himself grow old before he rang off.

Paula Reismann had died in hospital; she had been

unable to speak, except to mutter 'Carl', the instant she died.

He sat back in his chair and waited, without any high hopes, for Cox to arrive with the inventory of the contents of the rooms in Putney.

His only hope was that Reismann would try to visit his wife; but that was a forlorn hope; he was certain that Reismann had deliberately left her to die.

He was back at rock bottom. He had to start again, without so much as a hint to help him.

20

ON the first of May Nigel Toler woke at dawn. Half an hour later, with his thick black coffee before him, he sat down at the piano and played without emotion, pausing now and then to sip his coffee. Sooner or later, he knew that Reismann would come once more into his life. But it would be the last time. One of them would die; or both of them. He did not care how long he had to wait. He would sit and play his music until he was tired enough to sleep again. He had no fear of death, or love of life. He struck another chord, and waited.

At 8.45 he heard the front door open and Mrs. Allen totter along the passage to the kitchen.

Some time later he stopped playing as the door opened. A round and wrinkled face, surmounted by a shock of iron-grey hair, peered round the door several inches below the knob. As if to emphasize her quite obvious presence, she flung a battered kneeling mat into the middle of the room and knocked loudly on the inside of the door.

"It's me, Mr. Toler, sir," she announced, "come to tidy up. It's me day for the floor."

"Good morning, Mrs. Allen. Can't you leave it till to-morrow?"

She snuffled loudly.

"Now you get away from that pianner, Mr. Toler, sir, an' I'll be done before you know it. Nice day, in it?"

"I'd rather you left it, Mrs. Allen. Really I would."

"You want to go for a nice little walk, Mr. Toler, sir." She snuffled again. "Nice day for a little walk. Spring 'as broke out."

Toler sighed and rose to his feet.

"All right, Mrs. Allen, but will you make me some more coffee first, please?"

"Awright, but wot you needs is a proper meal. Corfy rots your insides. That's wot my old man always said. Rots your insides, it does."

With one last gargantuan snuffle, she left the room.

As she shut the door behind her Toler turned and looked out of the window. As he did so something seemed to stir within him. There was something in what Mrs. Allen had said. The sun was shining. Not the rare, bleak, watery sun of winter, but the steady, warm, rejuvenating sun of spring. His mind began to work, faster than it had done at any time during all these dreary weeks of waiting. He suddenly realized that he could wait no longer. The time had come for action; and action he had to have. The shadow of an idea began to take shape in his mind. That was enough. He could think about it on his way into town.

Without another thought he picked up the telephone and ordered a hired car to take him into Staines. From there, if no one wasted any time, he would be able to catch the next express train to Waterloo. Then he called to Mrs. Allen to hurry the coffee along.

* * * *

"Well, Mr. Toler," said Inspector Cox, "this is a surprise. Won't you sit down."

"Thanks," said Toler, "but I really wanted to see Superintendent Henderson."

"He's out at the moment, but he should be back before long. But perhaps I can help you."

"Yes. I suppose so. I don't want your help; I want to offer mine."

"How do you mean?"

"I've been thinking. So far as I know, you haven't caught Reismann yet. Have you?"

"No. But we expect to catch him before so very long now. He's on the run, and as soon as a man starts running it's only a question of time before we get him." He smiled, and contrived in doing so to look remarkably like a toby jug. "What did you want to suggest?"

"Well, Inspector, as long as Reismann is free, my life

isn't worth living. Sooner or later he's going to have a crack at me, and I'm not really sure that I care whether he gets me or not, so long as he gets caught."

"If he comes anywhere near you, you can rest assured that he will be caught."

"What do you mean?"

Cox smiled benevolently.

"We're keeping a very careful watch over you."

"I thought I told you I wanted to be left alone," said Toler angrily. "If I want a watch dog, I'll ask for it."

"Be reasonable, Mr. Toler. We don't like it, but you're bait. If Reismann bites, we get him, and probably save you into the bargain. On your own you wouldn't stand a chance."

Toler screwed up his lips.

"I see. Rather wrecks my suggestion."

"Why?"

"I was going to offer myself as bait. But a bit more pointedly. Couldn't we rig up some situation where Reismann had to kill me to keep my mouth shut. I don't know what we could do, that's your worry, but I'm game to chance anything."

"Well," said Cox, tucking his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, "that's very good of you, Mr. Toler. But speaking for myself, I wouldn't think of it. It's far too dangerous."

"I don't give a damn about that. All I want is to help get Reismann."

"I know how you feel. But suppose we let the Super decide. It's really up to him anyway."

"What do you mean: you know how I feel? You haven't the remotest idea how I feel about that bastard."

"Wouldn't say that, sir. He killed old Tilbury, you know. And anyway, I can understand how you felt about that girl. It's a wonder she had to drown herself. I'd have thought the bashing he gave her would have killed her."

Toler's mouth clamped shut. Pale and wide-eyed, he rose slowly to his feet and looked down at Cox. The illusion that had held together the frayed strands of his self-control

was shattered. It was real. Without a word he turned and strode desperately out of the room.

* * * *

Toler ran, not knowing why, as fast as he could, down Whitehall to Westminster underground station. He crammed a sixpence into the ticket machine at the end of the row and snatched out the ticket with thumb-like fingers. For less than half a minute he stood waiting on the platform that seemed to reel beneath his feet. The train, like a mad mechanical beetle, crashed into the station. Toler half jumped, half fell into the coach and sagged into a seat. As the train began to move again he dropped his head into his hands and fought desperately with the waves of nausea which sought to engulf him.

The train rumbled on, stopping and waiting and starting, and rumbling on again. They had gone over half-way round the inner circle before he raised his head. He felt sick and cold, but he had control of himself. He felt in his pockets for a cigarette, but he had come out without them. He only had a pipe, but a pipe is a peaceful smoke; it wouldn't do.

Then he noticed, sitting on the opposite side of the coach, a man wearing a soft hat and a fawn raincoat. He had 'policeman' written all over him. Toler had not yet had time to decide what he should do, but now he knew that he had not imagined those screams he had to go on alone. Somehow, he was going to find Reismann and kill him with his own hands. The hangman couldn't help him any more. So first of all, whatever he decided to do later, he had to make sure that he was on his own. And he could think of only one way of doing that.

He waited. The train started and stopped and rumbled on along its route. Back at Westminster again and they had not once been alone in the coach. All along the eastern end of the loop, people came and went at every station, but always one or two remained. Then King's Cross. The coach emptied. He was alone with the detective. The pause at the platform seemed endless. A man stepped in at the doorway, then changed his mind and went farther

along the train. Toler relaxed again. The train started. He got up from his seat. There was less than a minute to go before they reached Euston Square. He went over to the detective and stood as close as he could.

"Excuse me," he said, hoping he sounded calm.

The man raised his head. Toler hit him with all his strength, fair and square on the point of the jaw. The man sagged without a murmur.

The train wheezed to a stop. Half a minute later Toler was out in the street above. He was on his own.

His mind was boiling. He did not know where he could start. But he knew that before he did anything he had to cease to be Nigel Toler. And he could never go back to Laleham until this business was settled, one way or the other.

He hailed a cab and went to his bank in the Strand. He cashed a cheque for a hundred pounds. It wasn't much but it would have to do. Even as it was, a hundred notes was a thick wad to have to carry around. It was liable to draw too much attention. But that was something he had to risk.

From the Strand he hurried across to Charing Cross Road. From a chemist's shop he bought cheap shaving tackle and tooth brush and soap, and then as an afterthought, a jar of strongly scented hair cream and a bottle of peroxide. From a disposals store on the opposite side of the road he next purchased a large, zip-fastened grip. Twenty yards farther along towards Cambridge Circus he went into an 'American' outfitters and came out half an hour later dressed in a broad-shouldered, loose-fitting, green gabardine suit, silk shirt, Hollywood sunset tie and a wide-brimmed brown hat. The clothes he had been wearing were crammed into the grip. Then he struck off on foot towards Paddington, and an hour later had become the tenant of a double room in a dubious hotel, where the desk clerk had been surprised that he could possibly have any use for a single room. It cost him five pounds to ensure that his meals would be served to him in his room, and that he should not be disturbed.

He spent the rest of the day trying to think, and getting nowhere. But every hour or so he got up from the bed and

dabbed his face with peroxide; to complete his transformation he had to exchange his tan for a pallid indoor complexion.

But where could he start? The question gnawed aimlessly at his mind.

At eight o'clock that evening a girl brought him up a meal. She explained to him, almost in words of one syllable, that if he was cold at night, she would be more expensive than a hot-water bottle, but much more fun. He sent her on her way and bolted the door.

He went on thinking, or trying to think. Where could he start?

Somewhere a clock struck twelve. He took off his clothes and fell into bed. A long time later he drifted into a troubled sleep.

It was still dark when he awoke. He lay on his back, tingling. He had it. He had the idea he wanted. It might be a dud, but it might also be the start he had been searching for. Anyway, it was worth a try, and it couldn't possibly do any harm. Where had Reismann been going that day in Richmond? Where? And why?

But he could not hurry. He reckoned that it would take three or four days to complete his transformation.

On the fourth morning he shaved for the first time since leaving Laleham, but he shaved rather less than usual. He left a narrow line of hair along his bleached upper lip, and side burns down as far as the lobes of his ears. In the green gabardine suit and the riotous tie, and with his hair thickly plastered with cheap hair cream, he looked the perfect spiv. He tried on the hat to check the complete effect. But before he left, as a precaution, he burned in the fire grate, his cheque book, letters, cards, and everything identifiable from his wallet.

He checked out of the hotel as quickly as he could and walked straight to Paddington Station and left his grip in the left-luggage office. Then he went down into the underground and bought a ticket to Richmond.

* * * *

An hour later he stood at the end of the alley where Reis-

mann had parked his car that day that seemed so long ago. On his right was the antique shop where he had bought the silver candlestick. He started walking. A shoemaker on the left and a tailor on the right. A confectioner and a junk shop. There he stopped. His heart leapt. P. G. Wells, Orientalist. It was a small shop with a window barely four feet wide; but it had about it an air of distinction. The window was draped in black velvet and in the middle stood a solitary exhibit; a magnificent Ming vase.

Toler walked slowly on to the end of the alley, wondering if this could be more than coincidence. At the end, where the alley gave on to a busy shopping street, he turned about and went back. He stopped again to look at the vase and began to wonder whether he should walk into the shop and chance his luck. He could gain nothing by standing around outside. He stepped towards the door, tingling. But before he could steel himself to touch the door it opened sharply from within. A small scruffily dressed man emerged and collided with Toler who, caught with his feet crossed, staggered across the alley, tripped, and fell headlong amongst the stacks of old books and magazines outside the junk shop. But the man did not stop. He hurried on up the alley and vanished round the corner.

The proprietor of the junk shop came out clad in a ragged khaki dust coat.

"Good gracious! Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "What happened?"

"Chap barged out of there and knocked me for six."

"A dirty little man?"

"That's right."

"Tut, tut, tut. I must speak to Wells about it. That's a messenger of some sort. Comes here every morning about this time. Has done for weeks. Everyone is complaining about him. No manners at all."

Toler pulled himself to his feet and brushed himself down.

"Forget it," he said. "I'm O.K."

"I shall still complain to Mr. Wells."

"You do that, if you like," said Toler, and walked away. He glanced at his watch. It was almost eleven o'clock.

He had an angle now, and he might be able to pull it off. And if he didn't? . . . That was that.

* * * *

After spending the night in a flop-house in Camden Town, Toler was back in Richmond by ten o'clock next morning. He had his story worked out. He knew it was thin, but unless he took this chance he might never get anywhere. He had to try.

From the station he went straight to the shop of Mr. P. G. Wells. As he walked down the alley his stomach was turning over and over. He felt as though he was about to throw up. He paused for a few moments, looking at the vase in the window, to take a last draw at his cigarette and to get a grip on himself.

He took a deep breath and opened the door. An expensively dressed woman stood at the glass-topped counter buying ivories. Toler waited just inside the door and pretended to examine a vase that was obviously the twin of the one in the window. It was ten minutes before the woman concluded her business and left, leaving a faint trail of heart-stirring perfume behind her. Toler turned as the proprietor came up to him. He was a small, dapper, distinguished little man with thick white hair. He straightened the lapels of his cutaway morning coat.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "Can I help you? That is a magnificent vase you have been examining."

In a flash the horrible realization came over Toler of the yawning flaw in his disguise; he looked like a spiv, but he could not possibly sound like one. But it was too late now; he had to play this through.

"Very," he agreed, as calmly as he could, "but hardly what I'm after. I really came to look at some Japanese paintings."

"Of course, sir. I have some excellent examples in stock. Had you any particular artist in mind?"

Toler felt his mouth grow dry; his tongue suddenly seemed too big.

"Mitsumu," he said.

"Mitsumu!" The little man eyed him sharply, and he

knew he was on the right track. But his heart was racing. He had little time; the man who had collided with him the previous day might arrive at any moment.

"Yes, Mitsumu. Have you any of his work?"

"I'm really not sure. Perhaps . . ."

"I wouldn't be interested in anything else."

The suavity dropped from Mr. Wells' narrow shoulders like a torn cloak.

"Come with me," he said sharply.

Toler followed him towards a door at the back of the shop.

21

SQUADRON LEADER NIELSON stood on the tarmac outside the administrative buildings at Squire's Warren Airfield and watched a flight of jet fighters take off, circle and scream off to the south. He turned and went back to his office.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed as he opened the door, "what brings you here, Henderson?"

"I'd like to have a word with you. Can you spare me a few minutes?"

"Yes, of course I can. But could you wait for five minutes or so? I've got a bunch of chaps waiting to be passed free from infection before they go on leave."

"That's O.K. I've got plenty of time."

It was almost a quarter of an hour before Nielson returned.

"Sorry to keep you, Henderson," he said, as he closed the door, "but everything's fixed now. I should be free for the rest of the morning. What did you want to see me about?"

"Have you heard from Toler?"

"No. He hardly ever writes to anyone. Anything wrong?"

"I don't know. We think he's gone off on his own after Reismann."

"God! What makes you think that?"

He gave Henderson a cigarette and took one for himself. When he had lit them both, Henderson gave a brief account of Toler's behaviour in Cox's office and in the Circle Line train.

Nielson scratched his chin.

"But why should he suddenly fly off the handle like that after behaving himself for all these weeks?"

"I don't know," said Henderson. "Apparently Cox

mentioned something about Reismann whipping the Chinese girl, and Toler went berserk."

"Of course!" cried Nielson. "Don't you see, Henderson?"

"No, I don't."

"It's obvious. Nigel thought he had been hypnotized into believing that Mu Tung Ho had been whipped. When we found out that it really had happened, I didn't tell him. I didn't think it was necessary, and anyway, I thought he'd be happier if he didn't know. Cox spilled the beans. That's why he went off like that. Unless you catch him, he's going to get himself killed, unless he manages to get Reismann first."

"I see." He paused. "I'll tell you what I want you to do. If Toler contacts you, let me know immediately so that I can have him tailed again. You never know, he might even lead us to Reismann."

"I don't know that I like that for an idea."

"Neither do I, but from the way Toler went off, I should think that the only way we could keep him out of things would be to lock him up in a cell."

"All right then, I'll let you know if I hear from him. But . . ."

"You won't have to worry. We'll take good care of him."

"Yes."

There was a long pause. Both men turned inwards to their own thoughts. Nielson broke the silence.

"How are you getting on? Got a line on Reismann yet?"

"We've really done quite well. We've tracked down his contact in Germany and we can rope him in any time we like. We've also located the other end of the chain over this side; he's an innocent-looking chap who lives in Bermondsey who sends innocent-looking letters to Germany every Friday. If things keep on going the way they are now, I reckon we should have Reismann in custody within the next two or three weeks."

"That's fine. I only hope you catch up with him before Nigel does."

"I think we stand more chance of catching him than Toler does."

"Yes. Of course you do. Silly of me to worry."

Henderson sighed and stubbed out his cigarette.

"You know, Nielson," he said. "I wish I had met Toler before all this started. He must have been a very remarkable chap."

"He was. I only knew him for a short time before he met up with Reismann, but I couldn't help being attracted to him. I often felt that if he'd been born a few centuries earlier he would have been either worshipped as a prophet, or burned at the stake. I've felt for a long time that his two encounters with Reismann, first in the City and then in Richmond, and then his running into Mu Tung Ho that day in Soho, were not quite the coincidences they seemed. Nigel believes they were, mind you, and he'd call me a fool if I said this to him. But I've noticed it quite often in all sorts of little things. For instance, I once saw him go to pick up the telephone before the bell started ringing."

"Some sort of extra sense, in fact. Yes, I've noticed that sort of thing in quite a few people myself. Old Tilbury was a bit like that. He could smell a crook a mile away. Funny thing is, most of these people don't realize that they are out of the ordinary. But when I said that Toler was a remarkable chap, I didn't mean it that way. When this beastly business started I had a look at his R.A.F. record. Remarkable. You know, Nielson, I felt very humble when I read of that affair in India."

Nielson blew his nose lustily.

"Will you promise me something, Henderson?"

"I don't understand."

"Don't ever mention that to anyone. I found out the details when I was in Hong Kong. Nigel was rather touchy about it and made me swear to keep it to myself. He said that he just happened to think of the right thing first and that no credit was due to him. He meant it too."

"Remarkable," said Henderson. He gave Nielson a cigarette and took one for himself.

"But if it comes to that," he went on, "you wouldn't exactly call Reismann run of the mill, would you? I mean, why should a man on the run from the police risk being caught by stopping to help in a road accident—particularly when that man is such a cold-blooded swine as Reismann?"

Of course, he does fancy himself as the saviour of humanity. That could account for it."

"It could. It might surprise you to know that the Chinese in Kowloon worshipped him. As you know, he vanished after he had operated on Nigel. Two days after as a matter of fact. And his going was a major calamity to the poor. He'd been treating their ills and injuries, free of charge, for the best part of eighteen months. In view of what he's done since, it doesn't make very good sense. But there may be something in what you say."

"And another thing, Nielson. Have you ever troubled to wonder why a man like Reismann should become a spy?"

"Could be this saviour of humanity racket. Or plain patriotism."

"I've got a better idea. Think.. He's a Eurasian, despised by East and West alike. In his talks with Toler and Miss Sansom he claimed affinity with Japan. It's my bet that in the East he boasted of his German blood."

"Why should he do that?"

"Obvious. Here in England it's fairly obvious that he isn't European, so he claims to be Oriental, in spirit at least. East of Suez, it's my bet that the boot would be on the other foot. But that isn't the point. Any half-caste wants to be accepted as an equal by those of the superior part of his blood. Reismann was lucky; Germany and Japan are just about equal in his eyes, I reckon. Now Reismann is a brilliant surgeon, but recognition of that would be given grudgingly and in spite of his mixed blood, not because of it. To gain equality I think he felt he had to show superior cunning in some more earthly pursuit. So he became a spy; and a damn' good one at that, so far as we know. Anyway, we know how cunning he is. Each time Toler tried to spill the beans to me, Reismann's existence became more improbable. When Toler tracked him down to 'The Dragons of Kunming', his treatment of Mu Tung Ho effectively sealed Toler's lips. If he hadn't kidnapped Miss Sansom, he'd still be in the clear. I wouldn't be after him anyway. And to think that he'd been openly practising in Hampstead all the time. It's just plain incredible."

He glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Good gracious, Nielson, I'd better be going. Can't just sit here gabbing."

"Won't you stay for lunch? The grub's quite good in the mess at the moment—if you keep off the cabbage."

"Thanks, Nielson, but I'm running late now."

"A snifter then?"

"Wish I could—but I can't. Come along and see me the next time you're up in town. Maybe I'll have some news for you by then. And don't forget. For God's sake let me know where Toler is if you find out. It might mean the difference between success and failure in this business."

"Don't worry. I'll do that. I want to see this mess cleared up even more than you do. I've had just about as much of it as I can stomach."

"Thanks, Nielson. I'll be seeing you then."

Nielson rose to show Henderson out. When they got to the door Nielson said:

"I knew there was something I wanted to ask you. I've just remembered. What happened to the Japanese manuscript you found at Reismann's place in Hampstead?"

Henderson gave a wry smile.

"I was afraid you'd ask that. You were right, of course, it was Jap. But it's given us weeks of fun. All I can tell you is that it's medical and is in code. That's the rub. The cipher people know nothing about medicine, and the medicos don't know a code from a cough drop. But I expect you can guess what it's all about. It should be interesting one of these days."

"Mm," said Nielson. Then: "Well, thanks for coming along, Henderson. I'll let you know the instant I learn where Nigel is."

"Thanks, Nielson. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Henderson."

They shook hands and went their several ways.

22

MR. WELLS led the way into a tiny, ill-lit office crammed with oriental *objets d'art*. Toler's palms were moist. He had made contact too easily.

"What do you want?" asked Wells, vigorously brushing back his thick white hair with his right hand.

"I don't know." For an instant Toler wondered whether he should try to match his speech with his dress, but realized that that would be more of a risk than a safeguard. He settled for dropped aitches instead.

"What are you doing here then? Who sent you?"

So far so good. He could still use the lines he had worked out in his mind. But his stomach was boiling worse than ever.

"Thought you were expecting me," he said truculently.

"Why should I be?"

"Met a chap in a pub in Chelsea who said I could make a tenner if I came here. Just told me to say what I just said out in the shop, and all I had to do was to do as I was told, ask no questions and keep my mouth shut."

Mr. Wells sat down behind his desk and eyed Toler closely.

"What was the name of this obliging friend of yours?"

"Don't know his name, only what he looks like."

"And what does he look like?"

Toler gave as accurate a description as he could of the man who had knocked him down the previous morning. And every second he expected to see the owner of the description burst in through the door.

"I see," said Wells. "Why could he not come himself?"

"He said the cops were on to him."

Mr. Wells shot up as though he had been stuck with a pin. But he relaxed immediately and smiled. He gazed at Toler for a full minute before he spoke again.

"Which regiment are you a deserter from?" asked Wells unexpectedly.

Toler jumped. His mind raced. His nausea almost got the better of him.

"Navy."

"You don't look very much like a sailor to me."

"Should bloody well hope not. Take me for a fool? And what damned business is it of yours?"

"Just interested, that's all."

Toler's knees were feeling weaker. Time was creeping on. If he didn't get out in the next few minutes, he never would.

"What d'you want me to do? Got anything for me?"

Wells gave him one more steely look and then opened a drawer in his desk. He produced a small package, neatly wrapped in brown paper.

"I won't ask you who you are," he said, "because I don't suppose you would tell me the truth if I did. But don't imagine that I won't know before very long." He paused for an icy smile. "Take this package," he went on, "and be at the corner of Jermyn Street and St. James's Street at half-past one this afternoon. If you keep your eyes open you will see a man with two carnations in his buttonhole, one red, one white. You will go up to him and hand him this package. If you are wanted for anything else, he will give you further instructions, if not, he will give you some money and you will—er—vanish. Understand?"

"I see."

Toler wanted to be off. It was almost eleven. But Wells was still waving the package in the air.

"And a word of warning. This is stolen property. If you are caught with it on you, you will be put away for a very long time; we will make sure of that. And if you fail to keep your appointment, for any other reason, or try to follow the man you are to meet, you will be dead before the week-end. Understand?"

Toler gulped involuntarily, but realized at once that it was the best thing he could have done. Mr. Wells smiled.

"Good," he said. "Now get out of here. You do not exactly lend tone to my establishment."

Toler went. His spirits rose as soon as he was out of

the office. He wanted to run, but forced himself to walk slowly. He opened the door. Fresh air greeted him. He stepped out. Then as he was closing the door behind him, the man whose arrival he was dreading scuttled up and grabbed the door handle.

"Mind yerself," he snapped irritably.

Toler hung on to the door.

"I've got it," he gasped. "Come on."

The man looked up at him with spiteful little eyes.

"Wot d'yer mean?"

"Mitsumu," said Toler desperately.

The word worked like a charm. The man gave him a vicious little scowl and let go of the door handle.

"Awright."

But as they turned to go, Toler felt his stomach chill as if he had been dashed into ice water. Mr. Wells had followed him to the door.

Toler led his companion quickly to the end of the alley and turned in among the crowds of shoppers.

Toler found to his amazement that in the sustained tension his mind was working far faster than usual. By the time they reached the post office he had worked out his next move.

He piloted Spiteful up to the telephone kiosks and said to him as aggressively as he could:

"You stay here. One false move on your part, friend, and you'll be feeding eels at the bottom of the river by midnight."

The man cowed. Toler had scored a minor victory. He stepped into the only vacant kiosk and stopped himself, only just in time, from dialling 999. Spiteful was watching him; 999 could not be anything else but 999. He steadied himself and dialled Whitehall 1212. He pressed button 'A' and his pennies dropped like the crash of doom. The Scotland Yard switchboard lived up to its boast; five seconds later he was speaking to Superintendent Henderson.

"This is Nigel Toler. . . ."

"Where are you?"

"Never mind. Don't ask questions. Listen. I've only got a second and this is important."

"Right. Go on."

"In about five minutes' time I'm going to take a scruffy little rat into Richmond Police Station. He's one of Reismann's men. For God's sake get on to them and say that the man is to be held at all costs. I can't charge him with anything, but if he's allowed to go, I'm a dead duck. And, Henderson, don't have me followed."

He put down the receiver before Henderson could reply. He had no reason to suppose that Henderson would want to do as he was told. But he had to get rid of Spiteful, and that was the only safe way he could think of.

He piloted Spiteful along, all unsuspecting, in the direction of the police station. Then, as they came opposite the door, he wrenched the little man's arm up between his shoulder blades and half shoved, half carried him inside. A constable stepped forward.

"Mr. Toler?"

"Yes."

Toler thrust the dumbfounded little man into the constable's welcoming arms, and turned and ran.

* * * *

Toler felt better as soon as the electric train rumbled out of Richmond station, but it was not until he had smoked a cigarette and lit a second one, that he conquered the nausea that had threatened him all morning.

As the train started again after its stop at Clapham Junction, Toler pulled the neatly wrapped package from his pocket. Whatever happened he had to know what he was carrying. He was alone in the compartment, and as the train was not scheduled to stop at Vauxhall, he had several minutes to himself, safe from any interruption, before the train arrived at Waterloo. It might well be the last chance he would get.

The brown paper was sealed with short strips of cellulose tape and he had some difficulty in detaching it without tearing the paper. He carefully unfolded the paper at one end and pulled out two flat cardboard boxes.

"Fancy that," he muttered to himself.

One box was labelled 'Calcium Iodo Bismuthate, in oil, for injection'; the other 'Streptomycin'.

"Well, well."

A lot of trouble was being taken to get this stuff, and he could think of only one person important enough to justify such trouble. Reismann was ill. Very ill.

He slid the cartons back into the brown paper and carefully resealed it. The train stopped at Waterloo.

He passed through the barrier and waited long enough to ensure that no one, from the train at least, wished to follow him. Then he hurried down into the underground and bought a ticket to Paddington. He had almost two hours to spare, and he was anxious to get rid of his conspicuous green suit. He was aiming to walk right into Reismann's lair, if he could find it, and realized that disguise would have only transient value there. But, whatever happened, he didn't want the police on his tail, and so far as they were concerned, the green suit was their principal method of identification. He reckoned that with his broad-brimmed hat, bleached face, moustache and side burns, he would be far safer in his own clothes.

At Paddington station he reclaimed his grip and made his way to the 'Gent's'. There, in an unsavoury cubicle, he wriggled out of the nauseous green suit, and thankfully back into his own clothes. Then he perched distastefully on the edge of the toilet seat and waited for a full fifteen minutes in the hope that anyone who had troubled to note him enter would not see him leave. As the hands of his watch crept round to twenty-past twelve he unbolted the door and stepped out, leaving the grip on the floor behind him. Months later, he reflected, it would be sold in some auction sale of lost property. He hoped that it would give its new owner more pleasure than it had given him.

Feeling that he was probably safer in crowds, he went straight to the Coventry Street Corner House, and ate a cheap, stand-up lunch. With food in his stomach the nausea that had haunted him all morning left him, but his palms were still nervously moist.

Punctually at one-thirty he was standing on the corner of St. James's Street and Jermyn Street, with the package held conspicuously in his hand.

He waited. It was almost twenty-five to two. He lit a cigarette, drawing on it fast and nervously so that it burned

his tongue. He flung it down, half smoked, into the gutter, wondering when next he would have peace to light his pipe. Two more minutes went by.

A chauffeur-driven car pulled out of the main stream coming down St. James's Street from Piccadilly and stopped at the kerb. A man got out from the back seat. The first thing Toler saw was his buttonhole; two carnations, one red, one white. Then he felt the blood drain from his face. It was Sammy; Sammy dressed like a gentleman in black coat and striped trousers and homburg hat, but he was still Sammy the pimp; there was something about him that clothes could not hide.

Sammy looked straight at him, but there was no recognition in his eyes. Reassured, Toler stepped forward.

"You're looking for me, I think," he said, and held out the package.

"Oh," said Sammy, taking it from him. "You're new, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Sammy turned the package over and over in his hands.

"Get in the car," he said. "We've got another little job for you to do. It's worth an extra twenty nikker to you."

"Fine," said Toler, fighting down the urge to drive his fist into Sammy's face.

He got into the car and sat down. Sammy sat beside him and shut the door. The car moved off.

Toler's head was whirling. It seemed too good to be true. He didn't have to run the risk of following them. They were taking him. It was up to him now. If he got within reach of Reismann he would kill the devil, somehow. And nothing mattered after that.

They were held up by the traffic at the bottom of St. James's Street. The sun was shining. Sunshine killed termites. Why was Sammy alive in the sunshine? He could kill Sammy where he sat; a sharp blow in the throat and then a rabbit punch on the right spot on the back of the neck, and he would be dead. Just like that. But he battered the thought from his mind. It was Reismann he was after. The law could hang Sammy in its own good time.

The traffic was moving again. They swung round into Pall Mall.

"What's your moniker?" asked Sammy suddenly.

"Norman Tallis," said Toler. He had been ready for that one. Then he chilled. He realized that, like all beginners, he had used his own initials.

Sammy was looking out of the window.

"Pretty name," he said.

"Glad you like it."

"I don't."

They were crossing Waterloo Place. Sammy slid his hand into the pocket in the door.

"I prefer Nigel Toler." There was an automatic in his hand.

Toler opened his mouth. The world went purple and red before his eyes. He stopped thinking.

"Look out of the window, Mr. Toler. It's a nice day for seeing the sights." The tone of his voice had not changed in the slightest. "Go on. Turn round and look out of the window."

Toler turned slowly. They were in Cockspur Street now. He felt the muzzle of the gun press into his hip.

"Behave yourself till we're out of the traffic and I won't shoot. But don't get any ideas, this car's so damn thick no one would hear if I did. And if I do shoot, I won't kill you, so it's no good hoping for that. I'll just cripple you. The boss wants you alive. He's got something special ready for you."

The old nausea returned. He couldn't think: There was no point in thinking; nothing to think about, and nowhere to start.

Stop at the lights in Trafalgar Square. Across into the Strand. Crawl along. A policeman on the corner; too far away to help. A bullet through the hips, crashing through his pelvis. He couldn't raise that much courage. And where would it get him?

Right turn into Lancaster Place, and out on to Waterloo Bridge. St. Paul's in the distance, soft and mellow in the sunlight. The car speeded up. The pressure of the gun muzzle eased. Something sharp jabbed into him. The world went black.

Toler's return to consciousness was as sudden and complete as his black-out. It was almost as though he had just blinked his eyes. But everything was changed. He found himself lying on his back on a dirty wooden floor, looking up into the peak of a low wooden roof. He was tightly bound, hand and foot. The only light there was filtered in through a wooden ventilator, and there was something about the quality of that light which told him that the sun was setting; it would soon be dark.

He rolled over on to his stomach. He was in some sort of loft, obviously reached by a trap door, for there was no evidence of any staircase. Dimly he could make out a pile of old canvas, and at the far side of the loft the remains of a snub-nosed sailing dinghy with its rusty keel plate sticking up in the air like a shark's fin. He lowered his head and put his eye to a crack in the floor. In the room below he thought he could make out the shadowy outlines of a skiff. It was a boathouse right enough. But where?

As he rolled about trying to get his bearings it dawned on him that the inside pocket of his jacket still bulged. They had left him his money. At least, if he got out of this, he would be able to pay his way. But how was he to get out? Reismann had something special for him. He either got out or died. That was the way things stood. There were no other alternatives. He cursed himself for not killing Sammy while he had a ghost of a chance. But where would that have got him? If he had escaped he would probably have lost his last chance of coming face to face with Reismann; and if he had stayed in the car he would probably have ended up exactly where he was now.

He was grateful for one thing, however. That dreadful, stultifying nausea had left him. He was calmer than he had been at any time since he had dashed from Cox's office in New Scotland Yard. And he felt happier when he realized that no innocent person was liable to suffer for anything he managed to do. Everyone, so far as he knew, was safe, and if by his own death he could also destroy Reismann, he was not afraid to die. But unless he could get free he would die without achieving anything. Reismann had something special. He could expect nothing so merciful as a bullet or the blade of a knife.

He rolled on to his back again and after several minutes' awkward manœuvre he managed to sit up and look around him. The light was fading rapidly now; he reckoned the time as about nine p.m. If he needed light for anything he could manage to do, then he must act quickly. But the loft was almost bare. He could make out nothing besides the old canvas and the rotting dinghy. He thought hard. His heart was hammering. There was nothing else for it. The dinghy was twenty feet away, but if he could reach it he might be able to cut his bindings on the rusted steel of the keel plate.

He started to edge his way across the floor, dragging himself forward by his heels. Inch by inch, foot by foot, he advanced. Almost half-way there. On again. Inch by inch. Then he gasped with pain as a huge splinter from the rotting floorboards tore deep into his left buttock. He clenched his teeth, fighting down the pain. He had to get across the floor. He couldn't stop now. It was the only chance he would get. Surely they would be coming for him soon. For a moment he thought of crying out for help. But there would be a guard somewhere in the building. He might attract attention and even get out alive, but then Reismann would be lost to him. He had to kill him himself. He bit his lip and moved another inch. The pain increased tenfold. Every nerve in his body jangled with agony. Sweat streamed down his face. Lights flashed and flickered in his brain. Then, fight against it though he did, he fainted.

23

AFTER Edith's murder Angela found she could no longer meet her mother's eyes. She felt that she alone was responsible for that. There could be no more happiness for her in Maidenhead. She felt guilty; and she was ashamed of her behaviour to Nigel. But she dubbed him coward for refusing her and for exposing her to Reismann. He was a coward and yet she longed for the touch of his hand. But how could she love a coward? Life seemed to offer two alternatives: that Nigel should die or that he should come to her. She dreaded both of them.

A week after Edith's death, she packed her bags and left home, and moved into a furnished flat high above the rumble of Chelsea. It swallowed almost her entire allowance, but it gave her a measure of peace of mind. From her lonely window she looked out over London. Spring broke through and blossomed into the fickle womanhood of early summer. She seldom went out; she felt safer behind her own closed door. She was miserable for most of her time, but at least she could forget about Edith. Sometimes she could forget about Nigel. But she could never drive Reismann from her thoughts; he had done too much to her, ever to be forgotten.

On the fifth day after Henderson's visit to Squire's Warren, Nielson found himself in London after receiving orders to attend a medical conference at the Air Ministry. And finding that he had the first afternoon to himself, he called first on Henderson, who could tell him nothing new, and then decided to call on Angela. A little after three o'clock he stood at the front door of her flat and pressed the bell push. The door opened.

She smiled at him and took him by the hand.

"Come in, Joe, come in," she said.

She was dressed in a brief white blouse that ended in a frill under her armpits, leaving her shoulders bare except

for the coppery mantle of her hair. Emerald green silk encased her slender hips and then floated out into the voluminous legs of harem pantaloons, gathered in at golden anklets. On her feet were tiny gilt slippers; her toenails matched her scarlet finger-tips.

She turned and led the way into a spacious, feminine sitting-room. As she walked her hips rippled beneath the tight silk. He wondered how any man could resist her. And he frowned.

"I won't stay," he said, "you must be expecting someone."

She spun round, eyes flashing. Then she smiled a wise, ageless smile.

"No, Joe, I'm not expecting anyone."

He eyed her critically.

"Don't look at me like that, Joe. This isn't a slave market."

"Sorry."

She shook his arm and smiled again.

"Come on, Joe, sit down and relax. You look hot, it's been a gorgeous day. . . . I'm really not expecting anyone, you know. You ought to know that a woman can only feel comfortable when she's feeling beautiful. . . . Even if she's all by herself."

He smiled and sat down by the window.

"I'll fix you a drink," she said. "Long gin squash?"

"Thank you. That sounds wonderful."

She went out into the kitchen to return a few moments later bearing two tall glasses. She handed one to Nielson and curled up on the window-seat.

"Hot, isn't it?" said Nielson. He still felt uncomfortably like an intruder.

He gave her a cigarette and took one himself. She drew the smoke deep into her lungs and breathed it out slowly through her nostrils. She flung her hair back over her creamy shoulders and gave a little smile.

"Anything happened, Joe?"

"Yes. Nigel has gone off after Reismann on his own. I wondered if you'd seen him."

"Do we have to talk about him?" Her face was expressionless.

"That's what I came here for."

"Look, Joe, I loved him once and this is all it got me." She turned her back on him and pulled down the back of her blouse. He could see no blemish on the silky skin, but he knew the marks still lingered in her mind. "That and a lot of fear," she went on. "I made a fool of myself over him, and he showed a yellow streak. He's a prude and a coward and I'd rather not discuss him."

Nielson sprang angrily to his feet.

"Look here, young lady," he said firmly. "It's high time someone brought you to your senses. You behaved disgracefully towards Nigel and because he wouldn't gratify you, all you can do is insult him. It's exactly the same with poor old Peter Vesey. You once described him to me as a spineless goon. Then he proved that he had more guts than most men I know. And what do you do? You flatly refuse to go and see him in hospital when one smile from you might make all the difference between life and death for him. You're a selfish, self-centred, spoilt little overgrown school-girl. And if you don't pull yourself together and grow up, I've a good mind to . . . oh, skip it," he finished, with an air of resigned disgust.

He expected some sort of angry outburst in reply, but instead she just lowered her head crestfallenly.

"For God's sake, Joe," she said, "don't you start lecturing me too. I've had as much of that as I can stand at home."

"Nevertheless, one day you'll take back what you just said about Nigel."

"No. Never."

"We'll see about that."

The doorbell rang. As she went out of the room to answer it, his eyes followed her involuntarily. No wonder she had so many men at her feet. She would expect to dominate her followers. No wonder she felt bitter towards Nigel.

The door opened and he heard a faint whistle, and then a man's voice.

He heard Angela say: "You're on the wrong floor."

The man's voice again. The door slammed. Angela came back into the room, cheeks blazing.

"The creature tried to . . ." Then she broke off.

Nielson scowled.

"I'd better go," he said, and brushed past her into the hall.

She grabbed him by the sleeve.

"Come back, damn you," she hissed. "I've had about as much of this as I can stand. You're all the same. You and Nigel and your stupid policeman who can't catch a crazy Eurasian spy, and even my own mother. You've all got me neatly labelled: 'Angela Sansom—Amateur Prostitute'."

Nielson turned and moistened his lips.

"I didn't say that," he said.

"You didn't have to."

She trembled for a moment, then turned and ran to the window and gazed out over the rooftops. After a long pause she spoke, softly but bitterly.

"If you've got any decency you'll sit down and listen to what I've got to say. If you prefer to stick to your own preconceived ideas, you can get out and stay out."

Nielson went back into the room and sat down on the arm of a chair and watched her standing there at the window. She turned and slumped down on the window-seat and cupped her head in her hand.

"I shouldn't have talked like that," she said hoarsely. "You don't have to listen to me if you don't want to, but I've got to get this off my chest to someone. I'm sick of people thinking these things. Do you want to listen?"

Nielson felt embarrassed and rather stupid.

"If you want me to," he said.

A full minute elapsed before she spoke, and somehow, in that time, she managed to communicate something of her turmoil of mind to Nielson.

"Have you met my mother?" she asked unexpectedly.

"No."

"You'd love her. She's sweet and gentle and kind. But she loves me too much. I suppose it's because I'm an only child, and Daddy's away more than he's home. She was wonderful to me until I was seventeen and then things went wrong. I got my first boy friend. He was big and strong and rather simple, and I thought he was wonderful. We went to theatres and dances and trips on the river, and I've

never been so happy in my life. Then one night I stayed out with him till after midnight. When I got back home, Mother came to my room and gave me a lecture. She said I was too beautiful to stay out late with men. She said that men would take advantage of me and all sorts of terrible things would happen. I couldn't understand what she meant; she'd never told me . . . things. And I'd never thought of myself as beautiful. Anyway I didn't take very much notice. Why should I have? I was in no danger; I hadn't done anything I shouldn't have done. Then, two or three weeks later, four of us went on a moonlight trip up the river. We had a wonderful time; played a gramophone and talked and had a lot of fun. And whether you believe it or not, I didn't even get kissed until we got back to the door of my home. Anyway, when we turned round to sail back to Maidenhead, the wind changed and it took us hours and hours to tack back against it. When I got home Mother was worried hairless and absolutely livid. She came into my bedroom and said that as I wouldn't listen to reason she was going to knock some sense into me. I was just getting into bed and she tried to smack me. It just developed into a free fight. Mother blacked her eye and I sprained my wrist. Next morning she apologized. I know she must have been worried out of her mind even to think of trying to do such a thing. We cried on each other's shoulders and agreed to forget the whole beastly incident. But we never really had any respect for each other after that. It makes me miserable every time I think of it. She's really such a wonderful person. I wish to God I'd let her beat me. I might have hated her but at least she wouldn't have looked ignominious to me. I think I loved my mother's dignity more than anything else; she hasn't had any dignity since then. I hate myself every time I look at her. . . . Give me another cigarette, Joe."

She raised her head as he flicked the monstrous duralumin lighter into flame, and he saw the face of an unhappy little girl. He wanted to comfort her but didn't know what to say.

She went on: "After that I started to tell lies when I wanted to go out with a man. Of course it was silly and I was found out. But once you've been proved a liar no

one will believe anything you say. A couple of years ago I went away to stay with a girl I know for a couple of days. Mother thought it was a man. I suppose she kept herself awake at night thinking about illegitimate brats. I've known a hell of a lot of men, but none of them have got what they hoped for. Only one man, Nigel, could have had me without benefit of clergy, and he pitched me out into the street. You don't have to believe me if you don't want to, Joe, but I swear that if I ever marry, my husband will know that his is the first bed I've shared. I know I've got plenty of other things to be ashamed of, but I reckon I've more than paid for my sins. I've lost my mother's respect. I've been kidnapped and tortured. The only man I ever really loved has turned out to be a coward. And now all I have to do is to sit and wait and wonder if Reismann is going to try to kill me." She rose to her feet and stood silhouetted against the window.

"Oh, Joe!" she cried, and flung herself into his arms. "Oh, Joe, I'm so miserable."

For a second, as his arms closed about her slender, trembling body, he almost regretted his married state. He forced the thought from his mind and patted her naked shoulder. He drew her closer to him.

"You're wrong about Nigel," he said.

But she did not answer. She buried her head in his shoulder and he thought she was weeping.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "My wife is arriving in London this afternoon. Why don't you come and have dinner with us to-night. It'll take you out of yourself. You'll feel much better afterwards."

"All right," she said simply, without raising her head.

"Good. We're going to the Ritz. We'll pick you up here at eight."

* * * *

As they sat over their coffee in the lounge of the Ritz, after an excellent dinner, Nielson felt a much happier man than when he had left Angela's flat that afternoon. His eyes flickered backwards and forwards between Angela and Louise as they chattered together. Both had physical per-

fection, but Louise alone had that air of dignity which marks some few women as above all others. He smiled to himself as he leaned forward to sip his coffee. He turned to Angela.

"I'm so glad you came to-night," he said.

"So am I, Joe. You may not believe it, but I haven't been out of that flat since I left home. I just don't feel safe anywhere any more. I suppose it's silly, and I expect I'll get over it in time."

A waiter came to Nielson's side, and said discreetly:

"Squadron Leader Nielson, you're wanted on the telephone, sir."

Nielson looked at his wife.

"Excuse me," he said, and left the table.

A few minutes later he returned. He was frowning.

"I'm afraid I'm wanted at the Air Ministry right away. Can't imagine what they want at this time of night. I always thought they went into a red-tape coma promptly at six o'clock. Will you two be all right if I pop you into a taxi? I've got to go at once."

Louise smiled.

"Don't worry about us, darling. I won't get lost between here and the Savoy. We'll get our own taxi, and I think I'll see Angela home first as she's feeling so nervous. But I do wish that once in a while you could forget to give these people details of what you propose to do in your spare time."

"If I remember rightly, this hasn't happened since 1943. I really don't think we can complain."

"Perhaps not, darling, but that doesn't make me like it. Now run along, and do try not to be too late. We'll manage quite all right."

For the first time in his life, Nielson stooped to kiss his wife's hand. She blushed. For some strange reason it seemed so much more intimate than a kiss on the lips.

* * * *

Louise saw Angela to the door of her flat, but refused to go in, for which Angela was thankful. She changed into her pyjamas, lit the gas fire, and settled herself in a fireside

chair. She picked up a copy of *Vogue* and stared at the cover illustration. She felt disturbed and a little angry. She had never been with a woman like Louise before. In the past she had always felt certain that she was the most beautiful creature at any gathering, but in the presence of Louise Nielson she had felt dull. She thought of wallflowers and flung the magazine away from her in disgust.

A draught ruffled her hair. The door which she herself had shut, closed gently. Her throat dried up. Her blood seemed to crystallize in her veins. She turned her head. The ghost of a scream hissed through her lips. She met his eyes and was lost. Her finger-nails split as she clawed them over the arms of her chair.

Carl Mitsumu Reismann lowered himself into the chair on the other side of the hearth and looked into her eyes. But it was not the Doctor Reismann who had tortured her so long ago. The hair of his head and his eyebrows had gone. The flesh hung from his bones in pallid, gangrenous folds. His hands were swathed in bandages.

"Good evening, Miss Sansom," he said. The words came thickly from between his puffy lips. "Please do not be afraid, you are quite safe. I have no wish to harm you."

Her lips trembled. She tried to swallow, but her throat was dry.

"Wh . . . what do you want?" she gasped. "I . . ."

He raised one bandaged hand.

"Will you deny me one last pleasure before I leave this world? Do not be afraid, Miss Sansom, you will come to no harm. I wish to talk to you." He sank back into his chair and closed his eyes. He laid his hands flat on his knees and licked his lips. Then he looked at her again. His eyes were still bright and clear.

Angela crouched back in her chair. His eyes seemed to destroy her power of speech; despite her terror in the past, she had not experienced that before. She gazed at the eyes which glistened in the rotting flesh of his face, and waited for him to speak again.

He shifted his position. The slightest movement seemed to cause him pain.

"To you, Miss Sansom, I am a monster. In me you see the embodiment of all that is evil and foreign to your way

of life. But I have struggled for a nobler cause than you will ever know. I wanted to bring beauty into the world, but I have failed. You could have helped me, but it is too late. I am about to die, but you will live on to be defiled by the âpes of Moscow. Remember that. Your chance has gone for ever."

He closed his eyes again and winced with pain.

"What do you want?" she gasped.

"I want to look on beauty again before I die. I had a wife who was gross and ugly because she could help me with my plans. I lived my life with ugliness because I wished to bring beauty to the world. I am a man, but I have never lain with beauty. The woman who was my wife wished to break your body because she knew why I had brought you to me. It is too late now. I will look once more, and then I will go."

Angela tried to control her thoughts. If only she could attract attention. If she could reach the phone. If she could strike him down while his eyes were closed.

But he looked at her again. He smiled; a bloated, sickening grimace.

"It is strange, Miss Sansom, that I should have chosen this night to visit you. For so long you have been alone, yet to-night I have to plot to see you. But it was my last deception. I will die so soon." He smiled again. "To think, my dear, that your wonderful police force is hunting me in the wastes of the London docks, even Mr. Toler could do better than that, yet here I am alone with a beautiful woman in the heart of London. I am brilliant, do you not think? If only I had taken you for my own instead of trying to wring your paltry secrets from you. If I had not loved you I could have torn the truth from you in a moment. And if I had not loved my duty, you would have shared my bed that night. But it is too late now." He sighed. The gangrenous cheeks quivered. He rose to his feet and looked down at her.

She tried to scream again as he moved towards her, but she could not part her lips.

"But I must go," he said. "I, the Imperial Messenger, am about to die, as only men can die. In the face of the rising sun, I will pass through The Gate of the Emperor

to join my ancestors. My body is defiled, but my spirit will rise up without blemish."

He bowed low.

"Good-bye, my love."

The telephone rang.

Reismann plunged his hands into his pockets and withdrew them again instantly. Covering his nose and mouth with a handkerchief he seemed to snap the bandaged fingers of his other hand in front of her face.

"Good-bye, my love."

Angela closed her eyes.

* * * *

Angela yawned and stretched herself. The telephone was ringing. She stretched out one creamy arm and picked it up.

"Lo," she said sleepily.

"Nielson here. Are you all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. Why?"

"That phone call was a fake. I wasn't wanted at all. You sound sleepy. Hope I didn't get you out of bed."

"No." She yawned again. "I went to sleep by the fire. You woke me up. I'd have felt like hell in the morning if I'd spent the night curled up in a chair. Funny thing though, that you should think something was wrong. I had the strangest dream. I dreamt that Reismann came here to visit me. And do you know what he came for? He came to tell me he was going to die, and that he loved me. . . ."

24

TOLER opened his eyes. He was weak and cold and shivering. He guessed that he had not been unconscious for more than a few minutes, but the faint seemed to have destroyed his strength. He lay there panting in the darkness. The pain from the splinter in his buttock had died to a dull nagging throb. But he knew that as soon as he moved the pain would flare up again. And he had to move. He had to get to that keel plate, an infinite ten feet away, and try to cut through his bonds before they came to get him. Reismann had something special for him. . . . He had to get free before they came, or he would die without getting his vengeance. Somehow he had to exact payment for those screams before he died. If he had to die.

He clenched his teeth and dragged himself another inch. The pain surged up like a million knives through his body. His nerves seemed to burst into flame. He sank his teeth into his trembling lower lip, trying not to cry out. He was beaten and he knew it. He lay back and sagged. There was nothing more he could do, but wait and try not to think.

He lay there, limp and cold, as the seconds and the minutes and the hours slid slowly by. And as time passed his mind became as flaccid as his body. How many hours he waited he did not know, except that he was certain that midnight was long since passed. He opened his eyes and realized that light was seeping up through the cracks in the floor. He turned his head and painfully edged his way sideways until he could see down into the room below. At first he could see nothing except the skiff that he had noticed those hours before. Then there were voices.

First of all Sammy: "The boat's ready, Mitsumu."

"That is good. There are still three hours before sunrise. That is time enough."

And a voice he could not recognize: "What about the geezer upstairs?"

"Sammy knows what to do with him. Wait until I have gone, and then you may start. But do not hurry in what you have to do. Our friend has a high price to pay. I see no reason why we should grant him a discount."

And then he saw below a tall figure clad in a long white robe. It had to be Reismann. And to Toler that robe meant only one thing, and a second later he realized that there could only be one place to which he could be going. Below a door opened and four figures passed across Toler's line of vision. Reismann, then a man who could have been a boatman, then Sammy and last of all a little rat of a man in chauffeur's uniform. Feet crunched on gravel outside. Rowlocks rattled. Then the splash splash of oars dipping into the water, growing fainter, and dying away. Footsteps below again. Sammy and the chauffeur came back alone and crossed his narrow field of vision.

"Shall we go up and get him?"

"Sure," said Sammy, "I'm looking forward to this."

The tail of a ladder swung round. Toler heard it rattle into place.

Sammy said: "Put that bloody heater away. He's all tied up. And anyway, one shot in here and we're as good as nabbed. I'll go up first."

Feet on the ladder. Twelve steps before he heard Sammy touch the ceiling. Must be a good twenty feet up. Toler stiffened. His legs were across the trapdoor. He could feel it lifting. His heart pounded. He still had a chance. Gritting his teeth against the maddening pain from his buttock, he jerked his knees up under his chin. He waited with the breath shuddering in through his teeth. A head appeared. Another second. Now! He jabbed out with both heels. He felt the smack as they connected with Sammy's chin, and heard the thud as his head smashed against the opposite side of the opening. Sammy went limp, but Toler went right on pushing. Back, back, farther, farther went Sammy's head. Then at last, a crack like a snapping branch. Toler smiled a tight agonized smile. Part of his debt was paid. He pulled his feet away. He heard Sammy's lifeless body fall. But too late, he realized that

he was off his balance. Down went his feet, swinging up his body. He screamed as the end of the splinter caught against the edge of the hole as he slid across it. His feet struck a rung of ladder. He dived out sideways, limp and helpless. For a fraction of a second he saw the chauffeur's startled eyes as he fell upon him. They went down together, and as they hit the floor, something crunched.

It was some minutes before Toler stirred. Then he twisted round and looked at the man beneath him. His eyes were open, blank and glassy, and his mouth seemed to be full of blood. Toler began to laugh, then pulled himself together, just in time. Completely helpless he had killed two armed men, and he was still as helpless as ever.

He forced himself up on to his knees. The pain didn't seem to matter any more. On the floor beside the chauffeur was a pistol. Toler made up his mind quickly. He had to hurry if he was to get there before it was too late. He dropped on to his side and fumbled until the pistol was firmly in his grip. Then up on to his knees again. Looking down between his legs, he manœuvred until the pistol muzzle was pressed against the knot in the cord which bound his ankles. He squeezed the trigger. The crash deafened him and the powder flash seared his ankles cruelly. But a moment later his legs were free and he was on his feet. He stepped towards the bench on his left, wincing as the splinter once more made itself felt. But he did not mind. On the bench was a newly honed sailmaker's knife. He fumbled with it until the blade was up between his wrists. A quick jerk, and he felt the cords slacken. He was free.

He massaged his wrists vigorously for a moment or two, and then stooped painfully. One more thing remained to be done. Closing his eyes and clenching his teeth, he grasped the end of the monstrous splinter between his fingertips and pulled. Five seconds later he dropped it, all bloody, to the floor. But the pain was scarcely bearable. The world spun round. Lights stabbed in his brain. For a moment he thought he would faint. Then nature had mercy on him and he vomited. He leaned weakly against the bench until he regained his grip on himself, then pushed open the door and stepped outside. He was on the banks of a river. Away to his right, against the starlit sky, was the unmistak-

able silhouette of Mortlake brewery. In his pocket were sixty pounds in notes. He still had time.

* * * *

Police Constable Babbacombe disliked the early morning beat. He hated the way his footsteps echoed from the long high wall which encircled Kew Gardens. There was only one good thing to be said for it. When he reached the bridge he could rest for a few minutes while leaning against the balustrade. And if he felt inclined, he could risk a surreptitious smoke. There wasn't much risk about it. If he heard anyone coming he could always drop his fag into the river. The early morning had its advantages all right, but he would much rather have been home in bed.

That morning, a while before dawn, he reached the bridge a few minutes earlier than usual and decided to treat himself to a whole cigarette instead of the dimp he had been saving in his tunic pocket. He listened carefully before he struck his match. And when the cigarette was burning well he shielded it in the palm of his hand as he drew the smoke deep into his lungs.

After a few minutes he found himself listening more keenly than usual. It was so faint that he could make no guesses. It seemed a long time before he could definitely recognize the sound of oars dipping regularly into the water.

He watched the skiff slip through the bridge beneath his feet. He smirked to himself. He could just make out the dark-clad figure at the oars, and the other, in white, reclining in the stern.

"Blimey," he muttered, "they're making a proper night of it and no mistake."

He allowed himself an even broader smirk when he realized that the rowing had stopped and that the skiff was pulling into the bank. They were some way away, but he could see the white figure stand up and then step out on to the bank.

"Cor," he muttered, letting his cigarette drop down into the river, "ain't life grand." He chuckled. "Go to it laddy."

He wasn't expecting such a sudden interruption to his romantic marvelling. The sound of the shot momentarily paralysed his mind. He saw the man at the oars topple slowly into the water. Then his hand grasped his whistle. Then, thinking better of it, he turned and ran to the nearest telephone.

* * * *

After his interview with Angela Sansom the previous evening, Henderson had gone back to his flat to think. He lay, fully clothed on his bed, turning things over in his mind, waiting for Cox to ring.

Angela was still sure that it had been a dream although the plain-clothes man on duty at the entrance to the block of flats in which she lived was ready to swear that he had seen a man leave the building who matched her description of the transfigured Reismann. He had not recognized him as such, but he could hardly be blamed for that. And then there were the fragments of a tiny glass vial that he had picked up from the hearth of her room, and the strange smell he had noticed as he had entered. He was perfectly satisfied that Reismann was in London. But he had to find him alive. Tilbury's life had to be paid for.

The first light of dawn was filtering in through the curtains of his room when the phone rang. He reached out and grasped it viciously.

"Yes?" he called.

It was Cox, sounding much more excited than he had been for months.

Henderson listened impatiently for some time. Then:

"Of course. Kew Gardens it is. Now I know he's mad. What? . . . Yes, of course. . . . The Gate of the Imperial Messenger. . . . I should have guessed it. . . . Get every available man out there as quick as you can. . . . We've still got about an hour if we're lucky. . . . I'll see you there."

* * * *

The cordon was already beginning to close in when Henderson arrived at the entrance to the Gardens. He

muttered several prayers of thanks that fate had decreed that he should have found his flat in Richmond, and not in Barnet or Ilford. The light was getting stronger every minute but it would be some time before the sun came up.

He found Cox waiting for him beside the pool where the pair of black Australian swans glided gracefully around the rotting dug-out canoe. A branch rattled lazily against the glass of the big hot-house.

"Morning, Cox. Everything under control? Can't afford a slip-up now."

"Yes, sir. They're closing in on the gateway. I reckon they'll have it surrounded in about five minutes' time. But why are you so sure it's the old gateway?"

"Simple, Cox. Reismann is mad as a hatter. He's a half-caste, but most of the time he seems to fancy himself in the rôle of Japanese gentleman. He's going to do himself in, if he can, and die like a Jap. *Hara kiri*, you know. So far as I can remember, that gateway is the only Japanese building in London. It was sent over here for the great exhibition of 1851. When the exhibition was over, the Emperor of Japan presented it to Queen Victoria and, so far as I know, it has stood in these gardens ever since. If Reismann wants to die like a Jap, I reckon this is the place he'd choose to do it. Let's get going, shall we?"

They started off across the grass and had gone some way when they saw two figures coming towards them. One was a uniformed constable. The other was not recognizable until they were only a few yards away.

"Good God, Toler!" exclaimed Henderson. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I might ask you the same thing," said Toler coldly. "I've found the swine without your help and I'm going to get him."

"Look here, Mr. Toler, that attitude won't get you anywhere. I haven't got time to argue now. If you're prepared to do as you're told you can come along with me now. If you want to be awkward I'll have the constable take you away. Which is it to be?"

Toler's face was expressionless.

"I won't be awkward, Henderson. Sorry I spoke like that. You've got your job to do."

"Well come along then, and keep quiet."

They hurried on across the grass until they caught up with the slowly moving cordon. Fifty yards away the Gate of the Imperial Messenger stood silhouetted against the sky. Henderson raised his whistle to his lips and blew a single blast. The main body of men came to a halt; here and there pairs of plain-clothes men continued to close in.

It was quite light now. The bloodshot eastern sky was turning blue. Toler felt strangely calm. As the light grew still stronger, the spirit of Mu Tung Ho seemed to draw close to him. He had served her as best he could. It was not his fault that the final reckoning was to be denied him.

Something white shone through the hedge which surrounded the gateway. They advanced with great caution, and it was not until they had almost reached the hedge that they could see a man, dressed in a shapeless white robe, kneeling on a small white sheet, with his back to the gate.

Reismann raised his head and laughed. The gangrenous cheeks quivered. Between his bandaged hands he held a narrow-bladed knife. He pressed its point gently to the side of his stomach.

He laughed again.

"Good morning, Mr. Henderson," he said. "You have gone to a great deal of unnecessary trouble. I am quite alone. Surely all these good men do not wish to see me end my life?"

Henderson turned to Toler. In a low voice he asked:

"Is that really Reismann? I've never actually seen him"

"Yes, that's him all right," replied Toler calmly.

Henderson stepped up to the gap in the hedge and looked over the low iron railing.

Reismann looked up and smiled sourly.

"I wished you good morning, Superintendent. Is discourtesy a part of your profession?"

"Carl Mitsumu Reismann," said Henderson firmly, though his face was pale, "I place you under arrest, charged with espionage and murder."

"Is that all?" asked Reismann. He laughed. Henderson half closed his eyes in horror at the sight of those

quivering cheeks. It seemed that the sloughing flesh was about to burst through the yellow-green skin.

"No, it isn't," snapped Henderson, "but it's enough to stretch your scrawny neck, and that's all I care about."

"Indeed, indeed. Please do not be so melodramatic. I have no intention of being arrested. As soon as I have said what I wish to say, I will end my life." He turned his head slightly. His voice sharpened. "Mr. Henderson, I have not finished. Will you kindly tell your underlings to stop trying to creep up behind me. They are wasting their time. Before they could reach me, I should be dead."

Henderson raised his hand as a signal. Then he said:

"Carl Mitsumu Reismann, I have to warn you that anything you say will be taken down in writing and may be used in evidence against you."

Reismann laughed again.

"Please, Superintendent, do not be stupid."

"Have you anything to say?"

"Of course," said Reismann. He still held the knife to his stomach.

Toler stood back, looking up at the gracefully curving roof which surmounts the massive gateway and wished that this dream would end.

Reismann was speaking.

"You would doubtless like me to tell you how much I have discovered, and to what use this knowledge will be put. You would like to know where I have been and how I have eluded your searchers. But these things you must find out for yourself."

Toler stiffened as he saw the head of Inspector Harris appear round the edge of the gateway.

"But there is another matter of which I would speak. Some time ago, I believe, you came into possession of a notebook of mine, and will, by now, of course, have had it translated and deciphered. It records the birth of a great discovery." He paused. "Once," he went on, "like your good Doctor Nielson, I swore an Hypocratic oath. Only once have I been forced to break that oath. I was forced to perform an operation on Mr. Toler, who by now will be dead."

Toler sprang forward. Henderson grabbed his arm.

"No, you bastard! I'm not dead. You're not quite so clever as you think."

Reismann's eyes flashed.

"This is a surprise, Mr. Toler, but it no longer matters. Let me go on."

Toler stepped back behind the hedge, with his jaw tightly clamped.

"I broke my oath," Reismann continued, as though there had been no interruption, "and now I would make amends. Do not permit my discovery to be used. It brings about almost miraculous healing of the tissues, but is not a blessing to mankind. I dreamt of a world in which no creature would be marred by scars and wounds. I dreamt that I had made my contribution to the world of perfection, which is man's right. But I have learned a lesson. Man is the servant of nature, not her master. If he seeks to hasten the process of growth, he will, as surely as the sun will rise, also hasten the process of decay. Nature, gentlemen, is balance. Destroy that balance, and you will destroy yourself." His voice rose to a shriek. "Look at me, gentlemen! Look at me! I am still alive, yet I am decaying as I live. I am mouldering as though I were already in the grave. Look at me, gentlemen! Look at me, and remember what you see!" He closed his eyes as though in pain. He swayed, but did not lower the knife from his side. Then he spoke again, softly: "I am about to die. I am about to die like a man. But if I had not the courage to destroy myself, I could not hope for much more of life."

Henderson shuddered, and wished that he could turn his eyes ~~from~~ the living corpse that knelt before him.

"I should say, Reismann, that allowing for the due processes of the law, you can expect to live for three months at the longest."

Reismann curled his bloated lips into a smile of infinite calm.

"You are wrong, Mr. Henderson," he said. "I will not live that many minutes."

He pointed with his knife towards the east. The sun was rising.

Inspector Harris darted round the corner of the gateway, and flung himself upon the kneeling man. There was a

brief struggle. For a few seconds it seemed that Reismann would have his way. Then the knife flew out over the hedge as Harris twisted Reismann's hands up behind his back. Once disarmed he ceased to struggle and allowed himself to be led away.

Toler picked up the knife from the dew-soaked grass and weighed it in his hand. It was beautifully balanced. The handle was of plain polished wood, but the razor-edged blade was a masterpiece.

He looked after Reismann, striding majestically between Harris and Henderson. But there was something horribly ludicrous about the scraggy, gangrenous neck, sticking out from that shapeless white robe. Toler followed on alone, some ten yards behind, lost in his thoughts. His mind was working slowly; he was very tired. He no longer noticed the pain from the laceration left by the splinter, and he was no longer aware that his trousers-leg was stiff with dried blood. He had walked some way before he looked down at the knife again. The realization came to him slowly. Then his vision blurred. In his hand was his instrument of destiny. He had not failed. He would not break his vow to the memory of Mu Tung Ho. He remembered the whale-bone rod and the blood and the screams. His nostrils were filled with the scent of cherry blossom as he sprang. He drove the blade vertically down beside Reismann's neck. Deep, as far as it would go. The blade sank in without effort as though it were slashing through sour cream.

Reismann clutched himself and coughed bloodily. A nauseous stench welled up from the gash in his shoulder. He crumpled silently to the ground and lay still.

Toler stepped back and threw the knife aside. A strange sense of completion crept over him. Joe would understand, that was all that mattered now. And yet he found himself wondering if Angela would care.

Henderson looked at him in cold, flint-hard rage.

"That, Mr. Toler," he said, "is murder."

And Nigel Toler smiled.

